

Post Rock Answers

By Cassie Thiessen February 9th, 2024

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Pruning Shrubs

This time of year sometimes moves slowly for gardeners. It's a good time to make your garden plan, order seeds, or dig into a new gardening book. If you are eager to get outside and do something in the landscape, there's a few tasks that can be done now.

One chore that can be taken care of now is pruning certain shrubs. Often, gardeners approach pruning with trepidation, but it is not as difficult as it may seem. Remember, not all shrubs need to be pruned (i.e., witch hazel), and certain shrubs, which will be identified later, should not be pruned this time of year. Shrubs are pruned to maintain or reduce size, rejuvenate growth, or to remove diseased, dead or damaged branches. Deciduous shrubs are those that lose their leaves each winter. Evergreen shrubs maintain foliage all year and include yews and junipers.

Deciduous shrubs are placed into three groups: Those that flower in the spring on wood produced last year, those that flower later in the year on current seasons' growth, and those that may produce flowers, but those flowers are of little ornamental value.

Shrubs that flower in the spring should not be pruned until immediately after flowering. Though pruning earlier will not harm the health of the plant, the flowering display will be reduced. Examples of these types of plants include forsythia, lilac and mock orange. Shrubs that bloom on current seasons' growth or that do not produce ornamental flowers are best pruned in late winter to early spring. Examples include Rose-of-Sharon, pyracantha (firethorn), Bumald spirea and Japanese spirea.

Pruning during the spring allows wounds to heal quickly without threat from insects or disease. There is no need to treat pruning cuts with paints or sealers. In fact, some of these products may slow down healing. There are three basic methods used in pruning shrubs: thinning, heading back and rejuvenating.

Thinning is used to thin out branches from a shrub that is too dense. It is accomplished by removing most of the inward growing twigs by either cutting them back to a larger branch or cutting them back to just above an outward-facing bud. On multi-stemmed shrubs, the oldest canes may be completely removed.

Heading back is done by removing the end of a branch by cutting it back to a bud and is used for either reducing height or keeping a shrub compact. Branches are not cut back to a uniform height because this results in a "witches-broom" effect.

Rejuvenation is the most severe type of pruning and may be used on multi-stem shrubs that have become too large, with too many old branches to justify saving the younger canes. All stems are cut back to 3- to 5-inch stubs. This is not recommended for all shrubs but does work well for spirea, forsythia, pyracantha, ninebark, Russian almond, little leaf mock orange, shrub roses and flowering quince.

If you are itching to get some landscape chores done, consider pruning some of your shrubs now. Make sure you know what type of shrub you are wanting to prune and follow the guidelines for that specific plant. If you have any questions, please call your local Extension office.

Post Rock Extension District of K-State Research and Extension serves Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Osborne, and Smith counties. Cassie may be contacted at c Thiessen@ksu.edu or by calling Beloit (785-738-3597).