

GARDENS & OUTDOOR LIVING



It's easier to prune a tree when it is young. Removing a low branch allows freer movement such as mowing beneath it. (photo/story courtesy Better Homes & Gardens)

Why Pruning is Important

Pruning is essential to plants' health, beauty, and safety. Keep all of these priorities—and a few others—in mind when you prune.

Regular and corrective pruning keeps trees, shrubs, and woody vines healthy by eliminating some problems and preventing others. Generally, pruning encourages new growth and vigor. Removing select branches lets light and air reach more parts of the plant. The ongoing priorities of pruning are the same for any plant: Remove damaged, diseased, or dead parts. When left on the plant, these parts become a harbor for pests and disease.

Prune With a Purpose

Accomplish other goals with pruning, improving the plant one way or another. Pruning is necessary when limbs create a safety issue, such as leaning precariously over a house or reaching overhead wires. These situations should be handled by a pro. When you wish to see more flowers or fruit on roses, raspberries, apples, camellias, or others, pruning is needed. Pruning also helps reveal the colorful bark of trees such as river birch and paperbark maple. And pruning prompts new colorful stems of shrubs, such as dogwood or kerria.

You can control a plant's size with good pruning,

whether you have a shrub planted too close to the house, an overly assertive vine, or a shapely topiary. Similarly, pruning helps maintain a plant's natural form or creates a formal shape. It depends on the plant and your goal, whether you have a casual hedge of lilacs or a tidy border of boxwoods. In the long run, pruning helps preserve a plant's integrity and your investment in it. Trees, shrubs, and woody vines vary in their growth habits and needs for pruning. Pruning helps you get to know your plants better and prompt them to become their best.

Pruning young trees encourages strong natural forms and leads to less work for you later in their lives. There's no need to prune a newly planted tree unless it has damaged or dead branches. Give it a year to establish itself before pruning. Over the next few years, prune annually to remove poorly positioned branches (crossing or competing) and help the tree develop its ideal form. Established trees need occasional pruning to remove dead branches. If the tree has been neglected, it may be necessary to control its size, reduce excess shade, or prevent branches from rubbing against each other, wires, buildings, or vehicles. As a rule, cut no more than one-fourth of the tree's branches in one year. If a tree

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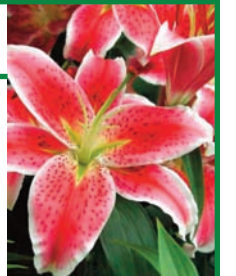
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needs extensive renovation, spread the task out over two or more years. Cutting more than 25 percent of any tree's branches can compromise its viability.

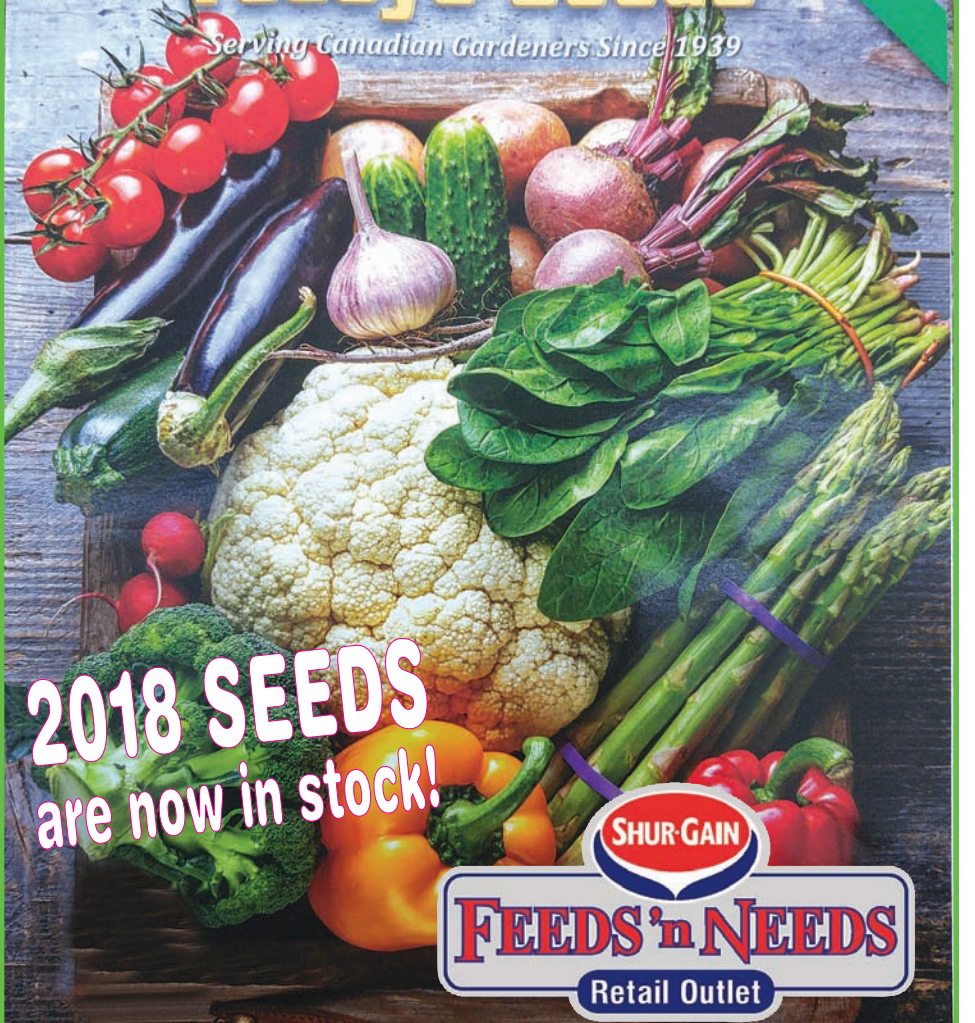
There isn't a single best time for pruning. Late winter is an ideal time for pruning many trees and shrubs because they are dormant and it is easier to see what needs to be pruned. Late-winter pruning promotes fast regrowth in spring. There are exceptions. Oaks and crabapples should be pruned in winter while they are dormant to keep diseases and insects from invading. Some trees, such as maples, birches, and magnolias, bleed sap heavily if pruned in late winter. This causes little harm but can be avoided by pruning these trees after they are fully leafed out in late spring or early summer.

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