

# The Scoop

on horticulture



## Spring Rejuvenation Pruning

*Including Hibiscus, Azaleas, Crape Myrtles & Roses*

Pruning plants in the landscape is one of the largest services that Austin Outdoor provides to our clients. Correct pruning involves the removal of branches without unnecessarily damaging the plant and leaving the wounds in the best possible condition

The most common reason for pruning the plants on our properties is to keep the plants at a desired size and under control. Other important reasons for pruning include:

- Remove dead wood
- Removal of diseased or damaged plant parts
- Improve air circulation
- Shape the plant
- Encourage new growth and blooms
- Remove crossing or broken stems and branches

A great time to work on various projects in Florida landscapes is after the chance of cold damage has passed in late winter / early spring. One of the most important projects you may focus on is your spring rejuvenation pruning of trees and shrubs.

Most of the trees and shrubs in Florida do not exhibit dormancy similar to what you will see up in the northern parts of the country, and these plants require year-round attention. What you will see is that during the winter months in Florida, the plants will slow down. Due to the slow down, you are able to take a little more time to pocket prune and rejuvenate these plants.

The plants that do exhibit winter dormancy give you an ideal opportunity to prune.

Some reasons for dormant plant pruning include:

- The framework of the tree/shrub is fully exposed, which allows you to easily see poorly located, weak and crossing or broken stems and branches.
- Wound healing is most rapid when coming out of dormancy.
- Pruning when the plants are not growing has the least effect on the food reserves in the plant.
- Most dormant flowering plants produce buds on new growth. Flower buds are not yet present and pruning at this time will not reduce flowering.

### Amount to Prune

When pruning is required, severe or over pruning should be avoided. Once a stem has been removed, it cannot be put back. You can always prune off more if necessary. Take your time and make several smaller cuts and remove smaller sections rather than taking off entire large branches all at once.

In general, no more than 20%-25% of a plant should be removed at any given time.

Over pruning can reduce the plant's ability to make food through photosynthesis. If it is necessary to remove more than this amount, then the pruning should be done over a period of several years.

### Rejuvenation Pruning

It is typical of landscapers to shear all of the plants in the landscape with gas hedge shears. This method of pruning creates plants that have an extremely dense canopy of leaves and does not allow light penetration or air movement into the interior sections of the plant. This environment retards leaf growth due to the lack of light and is an ideal location for diseases and insects.

### Hibiscus



Over-Pruned Hibiscus, which causes less flowers

### Azaleas



Over-Pruned Azaleas, which causes less flowers

### Crape Myrtles



Well-Pruned Crape Myrtle with natural form





Result of "Topping" a Crape Myrtle



Topped (left) vs. Un-Pruned Tree (right)



Crape Myrtle in Need of Pruning



Crape Myrtle After Proper Pruning

A common mistake of landscape companies who wish to improve this situation is to take away the gas hedge shears and give the employees hand pruning shears and hand hedge clippers. **The end result is that without proper training, the same type of pruning is performed but at a much slower pace.**

**Solution: PROPER TRAINING!!** Gas hedge shears have their purpose and are a useful tool. Employees must understand when to use the gas shears and also when to pull out the other hand tools AND use them properly. They can often be used in conjunction with one another where the plant is sheared to the desired size. Then, select branches are removed from the inside by hand.

Many plants that have been sheared for years need to be rejuvenated by reaching into the foliage and removing branches below the plant canopy. A common term for this is **pocket pruning**. The open pockets will allow light and air to penetrate the canopy and allow new growth to start up inside the canopy.

**Hibiscus** is a plant that will benefit substantially from this type of pruning. These plants bloom on the tip of new growth. If shearing is done on a regular basis, then all of the flowers are removed, which leaves you with a green plant year round. Hibiscus has a three-tiered approach to pruning. You have to keep the currently blooming stems, remove the stems that have no blooms on them deeper into the canopy, and remove another section of stems mid-way between the two. This will allow for new flowers to be produced and grow without losing them to mechanical removal.

**Azaleas** are another plant that can benefit from rejuvenation pruning. It is important to note that azaleas **MUST NOT** be pruned into the summer. July 4th is a general cut-off date for azalea pruning. There are many varieties of azaleas with varying cut-off dates for pruning. Know your plant!

### **Crape Myrtles – Preventing “Crape Murder”**

Crape Myrtles are one of the most abused plants in our landscape. They generally require a minimum amount of pruning when properly maintained. Some pruning is of benefit, but there is a definite right way and a definite wrong way to prune these plants. The wrong way is commonly referred to as “Crape Murder.”

The practice of chopping off branches at the Knuckle (formed by years of pruning in the same place) has become very commonplace. Many people believe that it is required to promote flowering; some prune because the plant is too large for the space provided; others see their neighbors doing it and feel the need to follow suit.

There is a belief that the severe pruning of Crape Myrtles in late winter or early spring will promote flowering. This is a misconception. Crape Myrtles flower substantially without any pruning.

Topping Crape Myrtles results in numerous vigorous shoots originating from the top of the cut stems. This ruins the natural form of the plant, which is especially obvious in winter after leaf drop. These quick growing, succulent shoots are poorly attached. The large bloom that develops on the end of each shoot is top heavy, often causing the shoot to break off in strong winds. In addition, topping can greatly reduce the number of bloom days because only one main flower cluster is borne on the end shoots instead of many smaller flower clusters with staggered bloom times.

Crape Myrtle pruning should follow standard pruning techniques used on other trees and shrubs. If you should feel the need to improve the appearance of the plant, then you may remove the seed heads before growth begins. This is recommended only if they are within reach – otherwise allow nature to take its course – the seeds will drop, the plant will bloom, and the natural grace of the plant has been retained.

Crape Myrtles that have seen years of abuse can, to an extent, be “untopped.” It will take years to repair the damage done, but to begin, you must perform one last topping. Remove all of the knuckles from the tree by cutting the branch or stem an inch below the knuckle at a 45 degree angle. This will force the plant to push out new growth from the buds below the cut. You can then allow the new growth to flourish for several years by pruning only as needed.



Pruning Main Shoot of  
Rose Bush

## Rose Pruning

Roses are a plant that can be intimidating to many gardeners. In general, roses are a hardy plant that can survive a lot of abuse. The goal is to keep the plant healthy and promote as many blooms as possible. Practices for rose pruning depend somewhat on the species, but there are certain general procedures.

Except for removing dead wood and shaping the plant, it is generally recommended to leave roses unpruned for the first 2 years and then use the “one-third” method. Each year, remove one-third of the oldest canes (in addition to any dead, diseased or dying canes). Remove flower stalks after blooming back to the height of the rest of the plant.

### Basics of Rose Pruning

1. Look at the overall plant but begin pruning from the base of the plant.
2. Prune to open the center of the plant to light and air circulation.
3. Make your cuts at a 45-degree angle, about ¼ inch above a bud that is facing toward the outside of the plant. The bud should be at the top part of the slant and should point towards the outside of the plant.
4. Remove all broken, dead, dying or diseased wood (Any branches that look dry, shriveled or black. Cut until the inside of the cane is white.) This includes all canes that show unusual discoloration or blotches, which could be disease.
5. Remove suckers growing from the root stock; the leaves will be different, so it's easy to identify them.
6. Remove any weak or twiggy branches that are thinner than a pencil.

## The Meaning of Rose Colors

- **Red:** Love, Beauty, Courage and Respect
- **White:** Purity, Innocence, Youthfulness
- **Pink:** Appreciation, Grace, Perfect Happiness
- **Light Pink:** Admiration, Sympathy, Sweetness
- **Yellow:** Joy, Friendship, Welcome Back
- **Yellow with Red Tip:** Falling in Love
- **Orange:** Desire, Enthusiasm
- **Red and White:** Given together these signify unity
- **Peach:** Appreciation, Gratitude
- **Pale Peach:** Modesty
- **Coral:** Desire
- **Lavender:** Love at first sight, Enchantment
- **Orange:** Fascination
- **Blue:** The unattainable, the impossible
- **Red Rosebud:** Symbolic of purity and loveliness
- **White Rosebud:** Symbolic of girlhood

