



Summer Pruning Light

ILLUSTRATIONS AND TEXT BY CHRISTINA PFEIFFER

A mid-July walk through the garden, collecting cuttings for an arrangement: Here, a stem of bold green leaves stands out amid the glowing, white variegations of a Japanese maple. Snip. Over there, arrow-straight shoots head skyward from the base of a contorted filbert. Snip. A tight cluster of five water sprouts crowd around an old pruning wound on a crabapple. Snip. Snip. Snip.

With just a few well-timed, well-placed pruning cuts, these garden plants will grow into good form with less effort. But many gardeners are confused, even fearful, of

pruning trees and shrubs during the summer season—and there are good reasons to be cautious. Yet some of those reasons make summer an ideal time of year to address certain kinds of pruning objectives.

Go with the flow

Early spring growth is urged along with the strong upward flow of sap. That early burst of growth is fueled by a potent supply of moisture and stored energy from the roots. Once that first flush of growth subsides, sugars produced from photosynthesis move back into the plant for storage and other

Above: Snip out the solid-green stems as soon as they appear or risk losing variegation throughout the whole plant.



Above: Unwanted suckers at the base of a tree are best removed while they are new and easily rubbed off by hand.

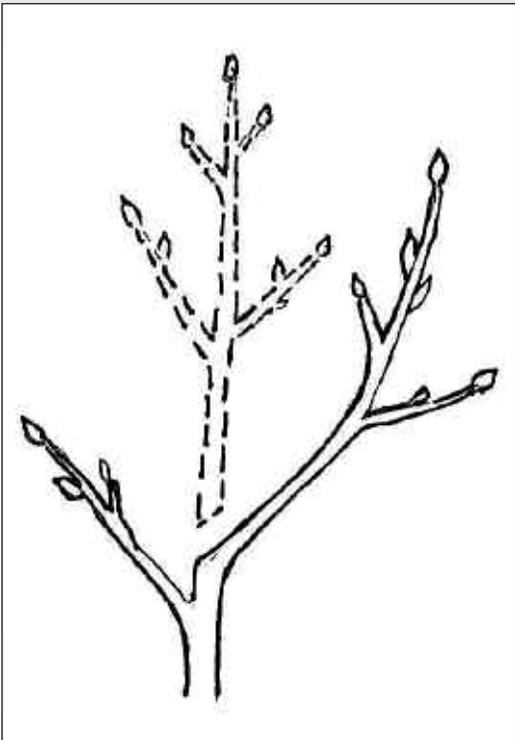
Below: Pull the soil away to cut root suckers off cleanly at their base (1)
Clusters of shoots formed on old suckers that were previously cut back to short stubs (2).



plant functions. As the growing season progresses, the predominant flow of energy shifts away from the shoot tips and buds, and into the stems and roots. The timing of a pruning cut in this seasonal cycle influences the plant's growth response.

After a dormant-season pruning cut is made, the typical response is vigorous growth from nearby dormant buds and small shoots. This makes dormant-season pruning ideal when lots of new shoot growth is the goal, say for renovation pruning or maintaining young stems on shrubs that bloom on new wood. This timing is less ideal when it comes to managing an overabundance of water sprouts or rampant shoot growth that invites more frequent pruning efforts. This is where summer pruning comes in.

Reduction cuts: To reduce the length or height of a stem, locate the pruning cut back to a strong lateral stem that is shorter and large enough in diameter to serve as a new leader.



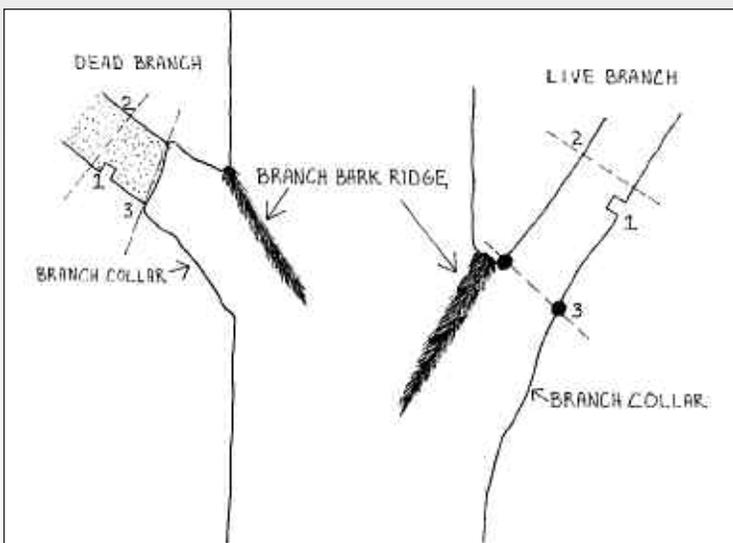
Keep the growth slow and the pruning light

Summer-season pruning results in a more modest and subdued growth response. Because removing leaf and stem areas decreases the amount of energy the plant can produce, heavy pruning in summer can stunt or weaken overall growth. This is not the time to consider renovation pruning. But light pruning in summer provides the advantage of reducing the proliferation of undesired shoots. Light pruning means the removal of just a few stems, maybe up to 10 percent of the total leaf area of a vigorous plant. The general timing to do light pruning is after shoot expansion has slowed and the plant has had some time to store new energy. Pruning done soon after shoot expansion ends tends to have a stronger dwarfing effect than pruning done later in the summer. Pruning out a little at a time over a few weeks is another option and is a helpful way to remove new errant-shoot growth while it is still small.

Best pruning work for summer

The dwarfing effect of summer pruning is probably used to greatest advantage in suppressing the repeated growth of water sprouts and suckers on garden trees such as crabapples (*Malus* sp.), hawthorns (*Crataegus* sp.) and *Magnolia*. Where water sprouts appear in clusters on a stem, removing only some of them will help decrease the immediate flush of replacement shoots that occur when all the sprouts are removed at once. Leave one or two of those sprouts to train as new lateral side shoots on that branch. This not only helps reduce the flush of repeat sprouts but retains needed leaf area on the inside of the canopy.

Take a careful look at the shoots appearing from the root area. If the leaves look different than the rest of the plant, it is likely root stock. Root stock sprouts are most easily and effec-



Above: To suppress the repeated growth of dense watersprouts, wait until summer and remove only some of the sprouts. Train the rest to be small lateral stems.

Left: To promote healthy wound closure, make a 3-part cut just outside the branch collar. An undercut (1) will prevent long, damaging tears in the bark. Cut from the top outside the undercut (2) to remove the heavy weight of the limb. Make a clean finish cut (3) along the outside of the branch collar. Don't cut into new wood that has grown over a dead branch (left).



tively removed as soon as they appear, when they are soft enough to be rubbed off by hand. Once root stock sprouts gain size, they are more difficult to remove and suppress. Left to grow, they will certainly deform, if not overtake, the grafted top.

Another type of shoot that can ruin a desired plant form is the reverted stem. These stems are shoots that shift back to the genetics of the original form. You will see this in the solid-green leaves on a variegated form or as the horn of typical spruce foliage poking through the finer leaves on a dwarf Alberta spruce (*Picea glauca* 'Conica'). The longer the reverted shoots remain, the more that will follow. And if too much of the plant changes back, it is less likely that it can be restored to the desired selection with pruning.

Scheduling some pruning tasks for summer can lighten the overall workload for maintaining hedges and espaliers. Vigorous woody vines such as *Wisteria*, grape (*Vitis* sp.) or hardy kiwi (*Actinidia*) can send out alarmingly long shoots

during the growing season. Pruning those wild shoots back to the main stems in summer will help contain their growth and form. Prune *Wisteria* after it blooms at least one more time, and then again in late summer to keep the vines manageable and ready for next season's work.

Summer follow-up

Trees, shrubs and woody vines that were cut back hard in the dormant season will benefit from summer pruning to tame wild or excess shoot growth. A multi-stem shrub that froze or was pruned back to the ground will typically produce a very dense crop of new stems. Thin those stems out to be far enough apart to lay an open lopper head between them. This typically provides good spacing for sturdy stem development and will make future pruning easier. Thick crops of water sprouts on tree branches can be tamed with selective light pruning in both the dormant and summer season. Woody vines that are pruned through the summer to maintain size



and keep overly long shoots at bay will be easier to work on and require less pruning during the coming dormant pruning cycle.

Dormant-season-only pruning of fruit trees used to be the standard routine, but Washington State University Mt. Vernon Experiment Station experts now promote a program of pruning modestly in winter, followed by a summer rotation of pruning and training for apple, pear and stone fruit trees.

Summer is also an ideal time to “tame the wild hairs”—those errant shoots that grow out of scale with the rest of the plant. Prune trees and shrubs now for clearance and visibility for longer-lasting results. Dead and damaged limbs can be removed now as well.

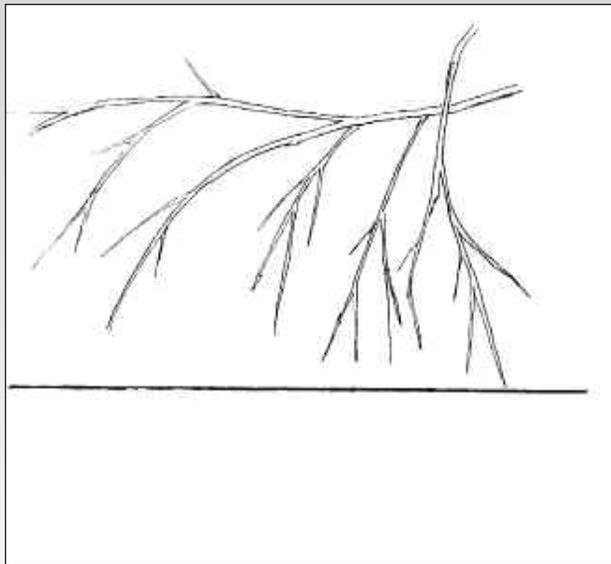
Avoiding pest problems

Summer pruning is not ideal for some tree species. The cherry bark tortrix, a borer insect which mates between June and late August and is attracted to fresh wounds, has made summer pruning for ornamental and fruiting cherries less than ideal. It is a similar case for elms, which are vulnerable to elm bark beetles carrying Dutch elm disease, and for some species of mature pines in locations where bark beetle infestations have been high.

Using the right cuts

No matter what time of year, good pruning results depend on well-placed, clean cuts

Above: Reduction cuts were used to shrink this *Daphne* ‘Carol Mackie’ (left). After thinning out some of the longest stems, the profile is smaller, there is good air and light circulation to the interior, and the natural form is retained (right).



To keep prostrate shrubs within bounds, remove the longest stems to a point of attachment far to the inside of the plants. Before (left) and after (right).
The finished plant retains its natural form and will need pruning less often.



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made with good sharp tools. Most of the pruning described here is best achieved with cuts made cleanly at the point of attachment, or back to a lateral stem that is at least one-third the diameter of the stem that is to be removed. On a tree or large shrub, that means placing the cut along the edge of the branch collar—the slightly swollen area where a branch is attached to the main trunk. On multi-stem shrubs, especially those with arching forms, it is usually more effective to remove the entire stem back to base or soil level than to simply shorten it. To remove root suckers, pull mulch and soil away in order to cut shoots off right at their bases (multiple shoots can grow back even from a short stub). Remove soft, new suckers and water sprouts while they are small enough to simply rub off.

While there are a wide variety of plants and pruning goals that may be addressed during summer, the pruning for each of them should be done with a light touch: The beauty of summer pruning is that less is more. And that handful of snipped stems might just contribute nicely to a summer arrangement. ☺

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