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## Perfect Pruning Practices

As a professional landscaper I understand the importance of proper pruning practices and how they affect the overall health of my trees and shrubs. However; not everyone shares my appreciation for a well-manicured Boxwood hedge, or understands the importance of proper timing when pruning their Lilacs. Pruning trees and shrubs is as much an acquired skill as cutting hair. Not all of us will develop into an Edward Scissor-hands, but if you follow a few basic rules of thumb your trees and shrubs will flourish.

I have always been a firm believer that any job, including pruning, begins with having the proper tools. Some of the basic tools required include a good set of bypass pruners, a hand saw, hedge shears, bypass loppers and a combination pole pruner / saw. Bypass pruners are probably the most essential tool, good for cuts less than 3/4" diameter. Bypass loppers are very similar but have longer handles to allow greater leverage for cuts up to 1 1/2" diameter. Hedge shears are ONLY meant for trimming hedges and nothing else. They usually cut succulent or small stems best. Handsaws are good for removing larger branches up to 4" diameter. Tri-cut or razor tooth pruning saws cut the fastest and with the least effort. Pole pruners are good for those hard to reach limbs. Any of these tools can be purchased from your local home improvement store or garden center.

Just having these tools isn't enough. It is extremely important to keep these tools clean and sharp at all times. Keeping your tools clean helps prevent the spread of vascular disease among your plants. Several common household items including Lysol, Pine-sol, Clorox, Isopropyl Alcohol and even Listerine Mouth Wash can be used to clean and disinfect your garden tools. Cleaning also helps extend the life of your tools by removing saps and soils, which can increase rust. If anything, tools should be cleaned after each use. Keeping your tools sharp is also extremely important. Not only will a sharp tool make your job easier by cutting quicker, but also the cut will be cleaner and cause less of an impact on the plant. Dull tools will often tear; rip or crush plant tissue and can do more harm than good.

Once you have acquired all the proper tools for the job you must consider proper timing. Pruning throughout the seasons trigger different responses. In the late Winter or early Spring, before the bud appears, is usually the best time to prune because the Spring season is time for new growth. Pruning should be delayed for most spring-blooming shrubs until immediately after flowering to avoid reducing the flowering cycle.

Pruning in the Summer tends to hinder growth of both suckers and foliage. Summer blooming shrubs should be pruned in early spring, as stated above or in summer immediately following flowering. Pruning that takes place in late summer or early Fall may

stimulate re-growth. When pruned at this time stems may not fully harden before winter and could possibly be damaged by cold weather.

In general, late winter, or late in the dormant season, is the best time for most pruning. Pruning during this time leaves the wounds exposed for only a short time before new growth starts to appear and cuts heal. Most air-borne diseases are not present during this time either. It is also much easier to see inner branches and make pruning decisions without the plant's leaves obscuring your view.

Exceptions to this rule include trees and shrubs that bloom early in the growing season on last year's growth. Some of these would include Crabapples, Magnolias, Dogwood, Lilac, Forsythia, Azalea, and Viburnum, just to name a few. These trees and shrubs should be pruned immediately after their blooms diminish.

Finally, I think it is important to understand why you are pruning. There are many purposes, which should be considered when pruning. The four, which I believe must be considered equally, include: 1) Pruning to promote plant health. 2) Pruning to improve plant appearance. 3) Pruning to protect people and property. 4) Pruning to maintain a plant's intended purpose in the landscape. Promoting plant health can be accomplished by removing dead, diseased, damaged and/or insect infested branches. You should also remove branches, which rub or cross. Plant appearance is best in its natural form. Try not to alter a plant's natural form unless it is necessary to keep it confined to specific space. Remember a good pruning job should not be noticed! Pruning to protect people and property might include removing branches with weak angles in areas where they could fall and cause injury. It may also mean removing a tree branch or keeping a shrub trimmed low enough that it does not obstruct the view of an intersection or the entry to your home for security purposes. Pruning to maintain a plants purpose as intended, might mean pruning specific plants as a hedge, or a in a tree-form. It may also mean pruning to encourage bloom or fruit development.

Remember pruning is the best preventative maintenance a plant can receive. Just like a child it is critical that a plant be trained to develop properly. Too many plants and trees are pruned improperly or never pruned at all, and can become a problem that is hard to remedy without costly removal.

To learn more about pruning techniques, check out Mulch 1st's monthly Library Series at the Community Library. On Wednesday, July 21, at 7 pm Chris will be at the Community Library sharing even more suggestions and techniques and will be available to answer your questions about pruning. For more information, please contact Community Library at (740) 965-3901.