

# HOME GROUNDS FACT SHEET



Cornell University  
Cooperative Extension  
Nassau County

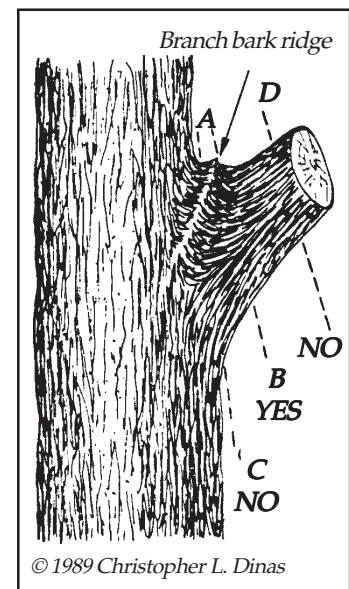


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## Pruning Trees and Shrubs

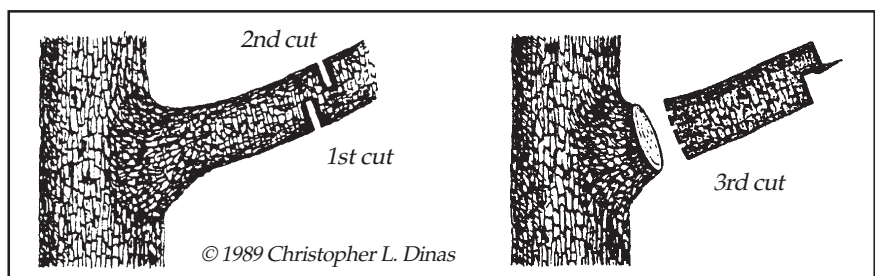
Shade trees should be pruned to remove structurally weak, dead, diseased or broken branches or those that interfere with utility wires, sidewalks or roads. Pruning enhances the overall habit of the tree. Early spring is the best time to prune — before bud break. The most important criteria with regard to timing is the rate at which wound closure (compartmentalization) takes place — prior to the onset of growth in spring or just after maximum leaf expansion in June. When necessary, pruning can be done safely at other times of the year, but wound closure will not be as rapid. Pruning of “bleeder” trees such as maple, dogwood and birch in spring should not affect the health of the tree.

The pruning operation should start from the top of the young tree so the pruner can remove any branches without retracing movements in the tree. Do not attempt any work that is beyond a pole saw or pole pruner that is used from the ground. In fact, as a tree begins to reach some maturity, it will benefit from crown thinning. (This is worth considering every 8-10 years.) The result is better light and air penetration into and through the tree. Since this form of pruning occurs up in the tree, it must be done by a trained professional arborist. When pruning trees, all cuts should be made following the procedure developed by Dr. Alex Shigo of the U.S. Forest Service. *Pictured* The area just behind the imaginary line connecting points A & B is a strong protective zone where compartmentalization occurs. This provides the greatest protection from decay entering the wound areas.



**Whenever removing a limb with a diameter greater than 1", use the 3-cut method to avoid tearing the bark.**

When the proper pruning techniques are employed and trees are kept in a healthy condition, it is not necessary to treat the wound with tree paint. Studies show that painting a wound does not stop decay or stall rot. Insects and diseases are not deterred by application of a tree wound paint.



When pruning diseased trees, great care should be exercised to be sure the tools are properly disinfected so the disease is retarded by pruning and not spread by it. All tools used on diseased trees should be disinfected between cuts. This can be done by dipping them in or wiping with 70% denatured alcohol or a solution of 9 parts water and 1 part clorox.

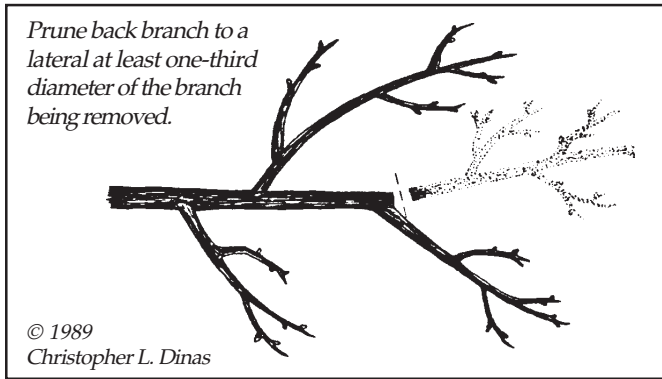
When pruning, be sure to remove the suckers or water sprouts that grow from the base of the tree trunk or up on branches at the sites of pruning cuts. Trees that have a tendency to do this are better pruned after new growth elongation, which reduces this type of unwanted shoot development.

If trees have not been pruned recently and heavy pruning is required, call a trained professional arborist to do the job correctly. One such job might be with heavily-branched tree species in which the interior of the crown becomes increasingly shaded.

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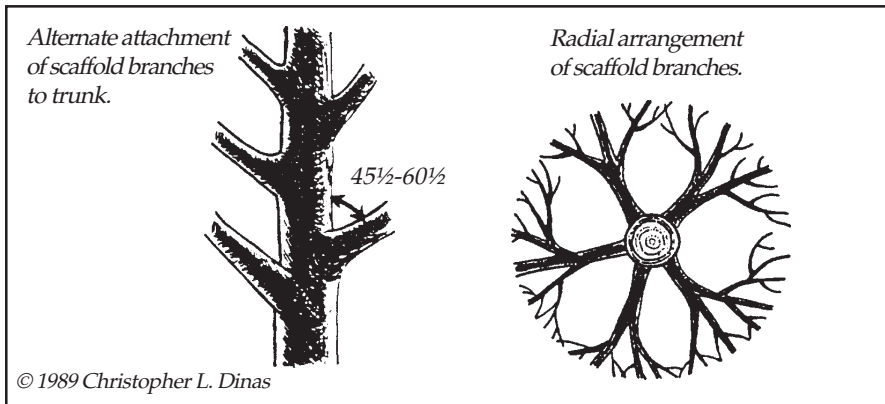
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## Heavily branched tree species

Thinning results in a more open habit and reduced height and spread while maintaining its natural appearance. Any branches that are removed in the thinning-out process should be taken back to their point of origin. They can alternately be pruned back to laterals that are at least one-third of the diameter of the limb being removed. While thinning-out is an accepted practice for reducing crown density and size, topping of the crown by cutting back main branches to stubs is not. Topping should be limited to compact hedges, not inflicted on trees.



The ideal time to begin developing a framework and proper branching structure within a tree is at or shortly after planting while the tree is still young and manageable. Remove the weakest of competing terminals, weak crotches and rubbing branches. Open up the tree to develop an alternating branching pattern from top to bottom and a radial branching habit within the total circumference of the tree.

## Flowering shrubs

Flowering shrubs should never be sheared, but should have the older, less productive and dead branches removed from the base.

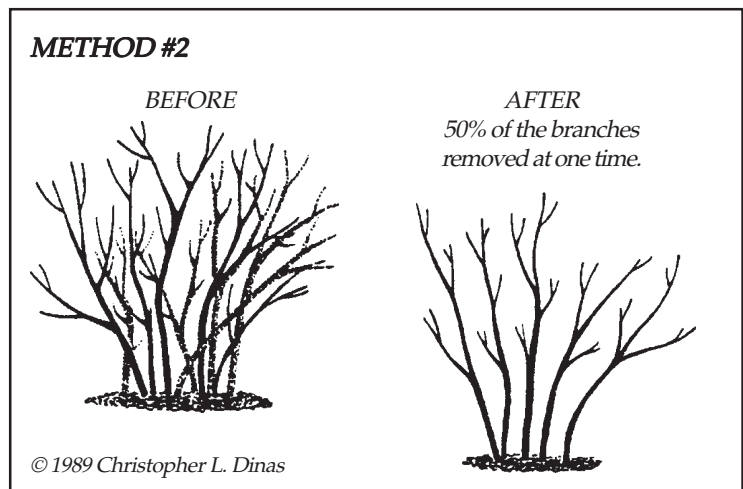
Deciduous shrubs can be rejuvenated when they become overgrown or are sparse at the bottom if they are still healthy. There are three different methods for accomplishing this task:

1. Completely cut back all canes to within 6" of the ground or to their point of origin.
2. Remove over 50% of the branches at the base, all at one time. (see accompanying sketch)
3. Remove 1/3 of the oldest stems at a time. Over a period of three years, only the youngest, most vigorous branches remain.

As new basal shoots develop (as a result of using any of the above methods), they should be cut back to various lengths and weak shoots removed to develop a strong new plant.

The pruning described above is not regular maintenance, but rejuvenative type pruning. It must be accomplished early in the season (February-April) so new growth will have a full growing season to mature before winter.

There are two schools of thought concerning time of selective/maintenance pruning of Spring-flowering shrubs. #1 Old, non-productive wood or any branches that are too long or out-of-scale with the natural habit of the plant (forsythia, for instance) should be pruned in the spring immediately after flowering. #2 The structural effect of the shrub is more important than flowering; plus the branching habit can be seen much better before the leaves appear. (The author's personal opinion favors #2.) As with shade trees, most rapid healing is also achieved at this time of year. Of course, some of those spring flowers will be sacrificed when employing method #2.



## Needled Evergreens

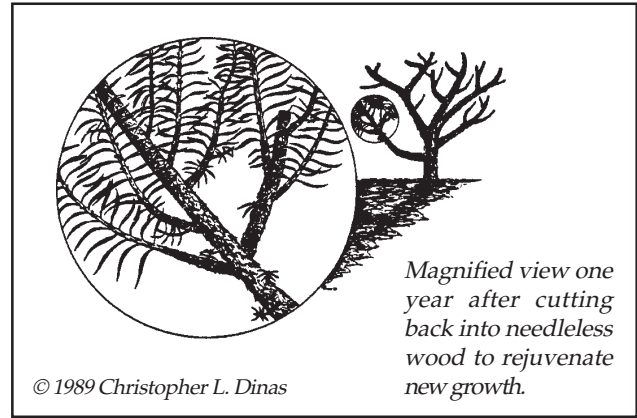
Evergreen trees such as pine, fir and spruce require very little pruning when used in the right locations. However, the density of their growth habit, especially when young, can be influenced by nipping the terminal shoots.

With spruce and fir, cut back individual twigs to where side buds are visible in early spring. With pines, when the new candle is about 2" long (May or June) pinch back half its length.

Evergreen shrubs such as arborvitae, Taxus, Chamaecyparis and junipers cannot be neglected for they can quickly grow too wide or tall for their allotted position in the landscape planting. They are best lightly maintained pruned every year when the new growth has fully extended by late June/July. Cut individual branch parts back to a branch fork or another lateral. When this growth is pruned back it encourages the plant to grow more bushy. If more extensive pruning is required by removing whole branches, cut back selectively to a point where young, living side branches occur.

Needled evergreen shrubs, once they are overgrown and/or if they have been sheared, are difficult to prune to a smaller size. Severe pruning would expose old, needleless wood on the interior of the shrubs. This old wood will rarely produce new, needled shoots and remain unsightly for a long time, if not permanently.

Taxus (yew) is considered an exception to this rule. If overgrown but healthy and growing in a proper location, it can be cut back hard (to bare, needleless wood) in early spring and will fill in a year or two later. (See drawing above.) Extra care (i.e. proper fertilization, watering and patience) will be needed during this ensuing rejuvenative period.

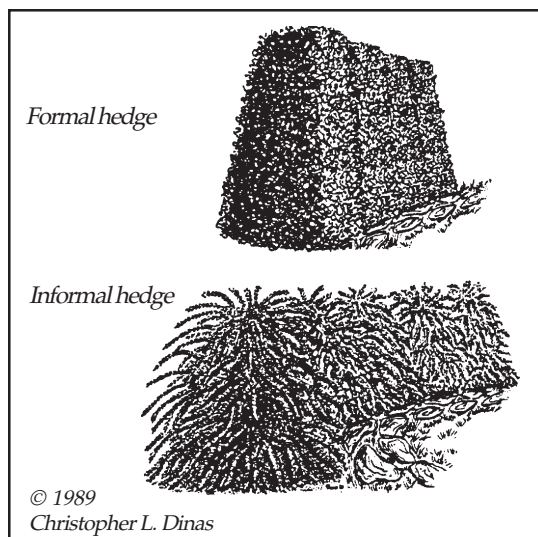


## Broad-leaved evergreens

These plants rarely require pruning except to remove dead, diseased, or non-productive branches. Let them grow naturally except for leggy, out-of-scale stems that are best removed to a lower lateral branch or close to their point of origin.

The removal of old flower trusses is frequently practiced to encourage increased flower production. These flowering parts can be broken off easily by hand immediately after flowering. Exercise care to avoid damaging leaf buds or new shoots just below the flowering parts.

If broadleaved evergreens such as Ilex (holly), Rhododendron, Pieris (andromeda), and azaleas become leggy and overgrown, they can be rejuvenated the same way as described for Taxus. When this pruning is severe, it must be done in late winter or early spring so the new shoots that grow from the bare branches will have the maximum duration of time to grow and harden-off before the following winter. Fertilizer, water and other cultural requirements are especially important in aiding regrowth of these cut-back plants.



## Hedges

Hedges can be formal or informal. Formal hedges must be sheared at least annually, while informal hedges require less frequent shearing or pruning except for the removal of dead, diseased or broken branches and to keep wayward branches in scale. All hedges should be sheared so they are broader at the bottom than at the top so the lower branches get maximum light.

Privet should be sheared in late winter and very often during the growing season. Don't shear any later than the first of September when terminal growth should be allowed to harden off. Yews and other narrow-leaved evergreens are usually sheared in winter or early spring and, if necessary, again in late June/early July after the main surge of growth is completed.