

The best time to prune is late winter or early spring before leaves or flowers appear. Early pruning allows you to study branch framework before it is hidden by foliage.

The first step is to remove deadwood. Broken branches and weak, spindly growth also should be trimmed. This protective pruning is all that you need to do--as far as the plant's health is concerned. It may be enough to please the eye, too. Additional trimming should be done only to modify the plant in the ways noted.

The first flush of spring growth helps pruning scars heal quickly. Trim shrubs a little each year. Annual attention will keep them shapely, sound, and attractive.

Prune shrubs that flower in the spring immediately after blooms have begun to fade. This is called *light heading back*. Remove a quarter of the top growth--about ten to 12 inches--over the crown and sides. Heading stimulates side-branching so the plant grows more compactly.

Shrubs with many twiggy branches benefit from a *hard heading back* or heavy pruning deep into the crown. To keep the plant groomed, remove a quarter of the branches each year by cutting back half their length.

Some shrubs, such as the hills-of-snow and peegee hydrangeas, as well as the red-osier dogwoods, give peak performance when shrubs are severely headed back almost to the ground each year.

*Thinning* involves removal of old limbs flush with the base of the shrub. Old shrubs can be rejuvenated with planned thinning; the process will span three years. Cut out about a third of the oldest canes each year. You'll have a productive plant with all new growth by the third year. Remove all stubs that might prevent the shrub from healing completely.