



Pruning Shrubs and Expanding Your Business

by Melinda Myers

In hard economic times, we are all looking for ways to increase business and build the bottom line. Most of you have probably been asked by clients if you could “take care of that shrub” while you are here and have a saw in hand. Many of you already included shrub pruning in your scope of work while others may be contemplating expanding into this area. Shrub pruning can certainly increase the opportunity for work with existing clients. Only you can decide if it fits into your business plan.

From a plant side there are some things to consider. Though shearing and shaping is the quick and easy solution to keeping shrubs down to size it is not the best thing for the plant. The stubs left from indiscriminate cuts make perfect entryways for insects and disease. Plus, we miss the real beauty of the shrub’s form, flower and bark when everything is pruned into gumdrops, rectangles and tuna fish cans.

Consider the plant’s natural form and bloom time when developing a pruning plan. Spring-flowering shrubs set their flowers the previous season. So timing is critical if you want to maintain the bloom while controlling their size. What’s the point of having a forsythia or lilac if it doesn’t flower? Anything green will do. Prune spring flowering shrubs like lilac, bridal wreath spirea, forsythia and mockorange right after they flower.

The big leaf (*Hydrangea macrophylla*) and lace cap hydrangeas also require special attention. The older blue- and pink-flowered hydrangea, like ‘Nikko Blue,’ bloom on stems that sprouted from the previous season’s growth. Winter kill or ground-level pruning during the dormant season results in beautiful leaves and no flowers. I recommend a bit of winter protection to increase the odds of winter survival. In spring, remove only the dead tips. If in doubt, leave it stand and wait for new growth to appear. If the plant constantly dies to the ground it is time to help your client embrace the beautiful greenery or go for a replacement. Some of the newer colorful hydrangeas bloom on new wood, eliminating this problem.

You may want to forgo the blooms one spring, when major renovations are

needed. Try to convince the client to sacrifice one spring season’s bloom for the health of the plant. Major pruning is less stressful on the plant and easier for you when done in late winter or early spring. The plant will soon begin to grow and the wounds close quickly allowing the plant to recover before the heat of summer.

Summer-blooming shrubs can be pruned anytime during the dormant season. I prefer late winter for several reasons. It is the best time for the health and vigor of the plant. You can remove winter damage at the same time you do routine pruning. Plus the shrubs add winter interest, shelter and sometimes food for the birds when left unpruned until spring. All this makes for a more attractive landscape your clients can enjoy.

Where you make the cut on shrubs is just as important as when pruning trees. Cut above a healthy bud or where a branch joins another branch. Older stems on suckering shrubs should be cut back to ground level to stimulate new growth at the base of the plant.

Make your cuts on a slight angle just above a single bud. Make sure the bud is facing away from the center of the plant and in the direction you want new growth. Make a straight cut slightly above double and whorled buds. All these buds will develop into stems so select buds pointed in directions where there is room for the new growth.

Use heading cuts to reduce the size of the plant by removing stems back to shorter side shoots or a healthy bud. This method helps you control those few wayward branches that outgrew the rest of the plant

Use thinning cuts to renew shrubs on a regular basis. The more vigorous the plant the more often you need to prune. Remove older stems to ground level or the main stem. Thinning opens up the plant, increasing airflow and light penetration which, as you know, improves flowering and discourages disease.

Renewal pruning uses thinning cuts to remove older growth, which is most susceptible to insects and diseases. It is also a great way to promote new growth at the

base of leggy shrubs that are leafless at the base. Remove one-third of the stems, starting with the oldest, each year for three years. You can also reduce the height of the plant at this time. Removing an older stem or two every year or so will keep the plant looking its best.

After three years, the plant will be shorter, leafed from top to bottom, and producing more flowers and fruit than before. Redtwig dogwoods are a perfect example. As the dogwood’s stems age, they change from a colorful red to brown. Renewal pruning removes the older brown stems, encouraging new, bright red growth that looks good year-round. This color-coded shrub is a perfect plant to begin with.

Rejuvenation pruning is used on overgrown plants or vigorous growers like summer-blooming spirea, potentilla, snowball hydrangeas and dieback shrubs like butterfly bush and blue mist spirea (*Caryopteris*). Schedule major rejuvenation pruning for late winter or early spring, whenever possible, so the plant has a full season to recover.

For rejuvenation pruning, cut all the stems back to 4 to 8 inches above ground level. You may need to provide your client with a little extra assurance the first time you drastically prune their plants. Plus be prepared, the results may not be quite what you would like. Overgrown shrubs can produce excessively long stems the season after rejuvenation pruning. You just may end up with a shrub larger than you started with. Your client may not be impressed. In this case, renewal pruning would have been a better choice.

Consider a modified version of rejuvenation for summer-blooming spireas and potentillas. When rejuvenated, these plants can become floppy and unattractive. Try cutting all the stems back halfway. Then remove half of the older stems to ground level. The older growth will provide added support and reduce floppiness that often occurs when all stems are pruned to the ground.

So take some time this spring to explore opportunities for expanding your business and providing quality service to your clientele.