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## **To Prune or Not to Prune**

Whether it's a warm winter or a cold winter, most gardening is still on standby. Winter is a great time to plan and reflect, start seeds, and prune trees and shrubs.

Pruning can be an effective way to shape a tree, whether for aesthetic, structural, or production reasons. Thinning a canopy can help reduce wind load or increase airflow and light for fruit development. Raising a canopy allows people to walk, mow, or even drive beneath branches. While there are benefits to pruning, it does introduce damage and should be timed properly.

Timing tree pruning involves a series of good and bad windows, depending on the plant. Trees and shrubs that flower in the spring shouldn't be pruned until after they flower, lest the buds get snipped off. However, if the blooms aren't deemed worth the special care, then normal pruning times will work. Another reason for the pruning delay might be for pollinators. Any dead stems that are left for habitat shouldn't be cleaned up until the weather is warm and the insects are fully active.

Winter, specifically late winter, is a great time to prune most woody ornamentals. The benefit is that, soon after pruning, the plant's growth begins to seal the wound. Winter also tends to put less stress on dormant trees, aside from a little drought and the occasional extreme freeze. Compare this to summer, with heat, drought, and pest stress.

Pruning should always be made with proper cuts, just outside the branch collar. This is the region where trunk wood merges into limb wood. Removing too much of the branch, a cut flat against the trunk, leaves large wounds that are slower to heal. A cut that leaves excess wood behind will lead to stubs that rot. Never remove more than one-third, or thirty-three percent, of a tree's canopy or an established shrub.

Wounds on trees seal up naturally, as part of bark growth. Any paint or covering on a pruning wound can trap moisture and is not recommended. Dead wood should always be cut out, but inspect the site for any signs of decay or pest activity.

Pruning can be a very necessary, yet damaging process for trees and shrubs. Make good cuts at the right time to give plants the opportunity to thrive.

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