

Fall Pruning Not Recommended

By Larry Caplan, Extension Horticulture Educator, Vanderburgh County, IN

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I get a lot of calls at this time of year from gardeners wondering how far back they can prune their landscape plants at this time of year. The short answer is: not at all...or as little as possible.

Fall pruning should be avoided. If performed too early in the fall, the plant might respond by putting on some new growth to replace the missing foliage; this new growth will most likely be killed off by the first hard freeze. The fresh cuts will not close off properly if the cuts are made in the fall, leading to stem dieback (this is especially serious on roses). Depending on the type of plant, you may be removing flower buds, reducing your blooms for next spring.

As I've mentioned many times in this column, you should have a reason for every pruning cut you make. In general, woody plants don't "need" to be pruned, especially for winter survival, so the first question I need to ask is, "Why are you pruning your plant?"

Dead twigs and branches won't get better, so go ahead and remove them now. This improves the appearance of the plant, increases safety, and possibly may lead you to discover why those branches died.

If the plant is "too big" for its location, you have the wrong plant in the wrong location. Try to dig it up and move it to a spot in the yard where it has plenty of room. If it's not possible to move, consider cutting it down, grinding out the roots, and planting a smaller species of plant.

Don't try to do heavy pruning to protect your plants from snow and ice. Some gardeners try to do this on arbor vitae and eastern redcedar, because they've seen how heavy loads of snow can bend the plants over. Delay this until after winter, and REPAIR any damage that the plants received, rather than try to prevent it. After all, this is southern Indiana, and snow is not always a guarantee.

A few individual branches of shrubs and small trees that have grown up in undesirable directions might be removed now, but only if there is a risk to humans or property. Follow the branch back to its point of origin on the trunk, and make the cut there. Try to remove less than 10 percent of the total plant's stem structure.

Ornamental grasses can be cut back now, but I normally prefer to leave them up until just before growth begins in the spring. The brown foliage and seed heads can provide some winter interest in the garden.

The exception to this advice is for large shade trees, which are very slow to respond to pruning. They can be pruned pretty much any time of the year. So, if the tree trimmers can only get to your tree in late fall or winter, let them do whatever they need to do for the health of your tree. Evansville residents: be sure to check for the company's Evansville Tree Trimmer's license!

For more information on pruning and landscape care, please contact the Purdue Extension Service at (812) 435-5287.