

Tips on pruning

MOST OF US tend to do a lot of pruning in late fall and winter, when plants are dormant. By choosing the correct tool for the job, one that is the right size and type for both the plant and your hand, you can make the job go faster and easier. Following is a look at the most commonly used pruning tools, but first a word about cutting action. The most common cutting action, the bypass, makes a cut like a scissor, with a top sharp blade passing by a lower unsharpened one. This produces a clean cut in a single motion. With anvil pruners the cutting blade comes down on a flat anvil plate. This type of cut is good for tough deadwood.

The tools

Flower shears — Small sharp shears are used for dead-heading and cutting blooms. Look for ones with soft handles and either large finger holes, or cushioned straight grips that are more comfortable for arthritic hands.

Hand pruners — Use hand pruners, also known as secateurs, for cutting back shrubs, woody perennials, etc. with branches about 1/2" to 3/4". Don't try to cut too big a branch. This is hard on your hand, and damages the branch by tearing it rather than making smooth cuts.

Extended-reach pruners — The longer reach of this hand pruner lets you prune from a standing or sitting position. They're a lot easier on your back since you can also prune lower down branches without bending over. Most cut up to about 3/4" and some have swivel heads so that you can cut a branch at any angle without bending your wrist.

Loppers — These larger two-handed cutters come in various lengths from and are for bigger branches, 3/4" - 2" in diameter. Some come with extendable handles for extra reach and leverage. There are also shorter, light weight loppers for those jobs that are just a bit too big for hand pruners. Loppers are often used over your head, so the overall weight is important.

Pole pruners — Usually 7 ft and longer, pole pruners are for trees. Most home gardeners wisely leave the bigger jobs to the professionals.

Size matters

Most traditional pruners have been built to fit the average man's hand. Women often find that these are just a bit of a stretch. Many companies are now making smaller versions of their better quality pruners. Gone are the days of "one-size-fits-all", and that goes for left-handers too. If you're a lefty using a right-handed pruner, you've got the blades reversed. That's harder on you and the plant. Look for "true" left-handed pruners that are the exact opposite of right-handed ones. The cutting blade is bevelled on one side only, the outside edge, and this should be the side that is nearest the branch.

Maintenance

Finally, whatever kind of pruners you are using, be sure to check sharpness regularly. A blunt tool will tend to tear and fold, damaging the plant. A good, sharp edge will do a more efficient job and is easier on the plant and the gardener. A smooth cutting motion is less jarring on joints and muscles. Sharpen your tools *carefully* with a good diamond or ceramic sharpening stone. Lee Valley Tools sells a simple but effective tool specifically designed for sharpening pruners. Before you put the tools away, be sure to remove any sap with soapy water or turpentine, and add a drop of household oil to pivot points.