Friday’s Feature

By

Theresa Friday

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To prune or not to prune…that is the question

Beautiful, spring weather is just around the corner. It’s time to start spring cleaning, both inside the house and outside in the landscape.

One of the first things you will want to tackle is the pruning of cold-damaged or overgrown plants. But not all plants can be pruned the same way or at the same time.

Timing is everything
If a shrub is grown for its flowers, time the pruning to minimize disruption of blooming. Spring-flowering shrubs bloom on last season’s growth and should be pruned soon after they bloom. This allows for vigorous summertime growth and results in plenty of flower buds the following year.

Some examples of shrubs that bloom on last season’s growth are azalea, spirea, mock orange, quince, hydrangea, weigelia, forsythia, gardenia, camellia, viburnum, and deutzia. For azaleas, complete pruning by late June or early July.

Some shrubs that bloom after May usually do so from buds which are formed on shoots that grow the same spring. These shrubs should be pruned in late winter to promote vigorous shoot growth in spring.

Examples of shrubs that bloom on current season’s growth include crapemyrtle, glossy abelia, butterfly bush, oleander, vitex and althea.

How much to prune
The extent of annual pruning depends on the plant. Some shrubs may require the removal of a considerable amount of wood each year, while others require little pruning. It’s much better to prune lightly each year rather than severely butcher a plant after several years of growth.

When you prune, first remove weak and spindly wood inside the plant or near the ground. Next, lower the height of the plant to the level you want by making cuts at various levels, always keeping in mind the natural form of the plant.
One rule for cane-type plants like nandina and mahonia is to remove one-third of the oldest and tallest canes near the ground each year. This will keep the height of the plant at a reasonable level.

**Palms are different**
Many palms have suffered significant cold damage in Northwest Florida. Pruning should wait until all chance of frost has passed. Then, only remove the leaves that are completely brown. If the leaves have any green on them, even if it is just on the petiole, wait to prune. Wait until the palm has produced 2 to 3 new leaves before removing these partially-green leaves.

However, if you think the spear leaf has died, give it a gentle pull. If the spear leaf pulls out easily, remove it and consider applying a copper fungicide bud drench. Contact your local Extension Office for more information.

**Perennials and tropicais**
With our perennials and tropical plants, it’s best to wait until new growth has occurred to ensure that live tissue is not removed.

If new growth has not emerged, it may be difficult to tell if the plants are alive or dead. One test is to scrape the outer bark to see if the cambium layer is green or brown. If the cambium layer is not green but is brown or black, the stem was injured by the cold and will not come back. Sometimes there is life closer to the ground level so don’t be too hasty to remove the plant.

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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