

The Science (and the Art) of Pruning

—Rick Barnes



THE REASON!

There are many reasons for pruning — to promote flowering, to invigorate a weakened plant or simply to bring an overgrown plant back into the scale of its landscape setting (or, in many cases, back down below the window ledge!) But understanding the *science* of pruning is critical to proper pruning. Without it, long-term maintenance of plantings may become a nightmare, and the health of the plant may be jeopardized.

THE ACTION AND THE REACTION!

Plants prefer to grow in a particular way — up! This is a physiological response within the plant to light and gravity. The botanical term for upward growth is known as apical dominance. The top shoot of the plant, the “leader” tries to remain higher on the plant than all the other shoots, the “laterals.” This leader produces auxin, a plant hormone that suppresses the growth of the laterals. If the leader is cut by pruning, the laterals begin a process of vigorous growth.

ONLY 2 WAYS TO PRUNE!

In all the world of incredible diversity of plant shapes, colors, textures, flowers, and growth habits, there are still only 2 methods of pruning. The best pruning cut is a thinning cut, in which a selected shoot is completely removed all the way back to a lateral shoot or main stem. Thinning the plant in this way encourages even growth of the plant at all levels — not just the top. The other type of pruning cut is the shearing cut, in which *every* shoot, leader and laterals alike, are cut.

SHEARING IS FOR SHEEP — NOT FOR PLANTS!

Taking the shears to your favorite shrub upsets the balance of nature. The plant develops, in effect, the raging hormones of a typical teenager! Every single shoot that was cut in the shearing process may produce 2-6 new shoots! Pruning in this manner necessitates re-shearing in a relatively short period of time, and the process sets up the gradual decline of the plant, unless this cycle is broken.

CURING THE GUMDROP SYNDROME

I once participated in a seminar in which the speaker described “gumdrop syndrome.” I laughed because I immediately conjured up a mental picture of what he was talking about. Images of perfectly geometrical living balls of chlorophyll, adorning the yards of America, danced in my head. Gumdrop syndrome leads to a leggy, overbranched, unhealthy plant because all of the foliage is on the outside surface of the plant. All of the interior foliage is shaded out by the dense cover on the outside, and simply falls off. The plant may become susceptible to insects, disease, and decline during unfavorable weather and climate conditions. They will eventually lose that perfect gumdrop shape. Drastic corrective pruning, followed by a lengthy recovery time, will be required to regain a proper shape.

A METHOD TO SHEAR MADNESS?

Despite all this negative talk about shearing, it can be a valuable pruning technique, especially in winter-pruning. Often, plants are sheared in order to restore structure or bring them back into scale of their landscape setting. However, following the shearing, the plants are then properly *thinned* to allow light and air movement within the plant canopy. As the plant grows out of this shearing/ thinning double-whammy, *thinning* becomes the pruning method for ongoing maintenance. At Nature Scapes, our pruning methods are focused on plant health and aesthetics, as well as teaching people that a healthy plant is one with structure, dense foliage, and shape. But shape is *irregular* in plants — we try not to yield the gumdrop!

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE ART?

One witnesses the *art* of pruning when one sees a once overgrown Savannah Holly full, lush, well shaped and back in scale with the rest of the landscape only a short time after proper corrective pruning. Or lush new growth on an Azalea or Holly that had a bad summer last year. Even small trees such as Redbuds or Crapemyrtles appear more as sculptures in the landscape after proper thinning out of dense, criss-crossed branches. The landscape becomes an artful whole when all of the elements within it are properly fitted components of the composition. So if this is the art, then who are the artists? The artists are the NatureScapes foremen who exhibit their talent on your property each week — our crews make pruning look easy, but their real talent doesn’t show until the plants do their part. The art directors? They come from two places. Allen and David come from NatureScapes, but the ultimate half of the art direction comes from *you*, our customer. Either through your management company or directly from you, your input is important to us in the “art direction” of your pruning. Now that you have had the crash course in pruning, you know that thinning, rather than shear madness, is the pruning method that will provide an obtainable, maintainable, and sustainable look for your landscape!