

## Proper Pruning of Shrubs

by Jane Morse, University of Florida/IFAS Manatee County Extension Agent

Even though we think of March as the perfect time to prune, it may not be. Some plants set their flower buds on the previous years growth, the buds overwinter and then flower in the spring. These plants include azaleas, spireas, Indian hawthorn and some hydrangea. To get the most flowering from these plants, wait until after their spring bloom to prune. Then begin pinching the new shoots as they grow. This pinching will give the plant lots of lateral branches which can develop flower buds for next year. When June arrives, stop pinching. For the best flower display no more pruning should be done on these plants until the following spring after they bloom.

Plants that produce flowers on this year's growth are usually pruned while dormant (early February), or just before the spring growth flush. These plants include hibiscus and rose. To encourage the most plant growth, prune just prior to the first spring growth flush. To slow growth and keep plants smaller, prune just after each growth flush. Again, pinching of new growth will encourage lateral branching and thus produce more flowers.

Pruning wounds callus the best when cuts are made just before, or immediately following, the spring growth flush. This quick wound closure is best to keep insects, diseases and decay organisms from entering the plant and it also looks better.

Pruning at the wrong time can cause cold injury. Late fall and early winter pruning stimulates new growth, especially if we have a mild winter. This new growth is very succulent and is easily damaged by even a light frost. Pruning done close to spring bud break reduces this risk of cold injury.

The first step in pruning a shrub is to remove all dead, diseased, or injured branches. Also, remove branches that cross or touch each other, or those growing willy-nilly. Cut each branch separately to different lengths with hand pruners. Cut back long branches to a bud or lateral branch 6 to 12 inches below the desirable plant height. When heading (cutting back) terminal shoots, make the cut on a slight slant 1/4 inch above a healthy bud. The bud should be facing the direction you want the branch to grow. Pruning in this manner creates a beautiful shrub that does not show any pruning cuts.

When pruning for a formal hedge, pruning should be done while the new growth is green and succulent, and plants should be trimmed so that the base of the hedge is wider than the top. It's best to cut each branch separately rather than use hedge shears. Always clean pruning equipment with a weak alcohol solution (1 part to 9 parts water) before using on a new plant, or if pruning diseased branches, clean before moving to the next branch.

For more in-depth information on pruning, call the University of Florida/IFAS Manatee County Extension Service at 722-4524 and ask to speak to a Master Gardener (available Monday-Friday, 9 AM

to 4 PM). We have lots of FREE publications to help you.

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**Jane Morse**

**Extension Agent, Environmental Horticulture, University of Florida/IFAS, Manatee County**

**1303 17th Street West, Palmetto, FL 34221**

**Phone: 941-722-4524      Fax: 941-721-6608**

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