

Do Your Plants Suffer from Indecent Exposure?

Here in the Southwest doctors advise against prolonged exposure to the sun. But did you know that plants can also suffer from sun damage and water stress if they are excessively or incorrectly pruned?

Plants that are continuously or improperly pruned require more water. In trying to replace the foliage that has been removed, plants use more water and nutrients. Here are a few pruning mistakes that should be avoided.

Extreme Pruning

Trees are the most important living element in our landscapes making their ensured health a priority. The pruning of live branches removes important parts of the tree that manufacture food for the entire plant. Severe pruning stresses trees and requires them to use stored food reserves. In the process, wounds are created that can permanently disfigure the tree and provide a perfect entry point for pathogens to invade tissues which eventually weakens the entire tree.

When branches are removed, they can never be replaced. To be safe, use the 'rules' of pruning by only removing dead, diseased, dying or crossing branches. Of course if a branch is obstructing a walkway or is a hazard it should be removed for safety. Limit the removal of branches to only what is absolutely necessary and never remove more than 25% in any year. While deciduous trees are best pruned when they are dormant, usually in January, remember that most desert-adapted trees should be pruned in May or early June.

Geometric Shapes

Shaping shrubs into round, cylinder or cupcake shapes requires repeated pruning with shears. This not only destroys their shape and blooming potential, it causes the lower part of the shrub to become bare and twiggy. Eventually only the top of the plant is crowned with leaves. More importantly, it **increases** the plant's water demands as it replaces foliage lost to pruning. If shrubs are touching or growing into other nearby shrubs, consider removing every other plant. If shrubs need to be pruned for size control, then use hand pruners to selectively cut back and remove branches, staggering the cuts to maintain or reduce the size of the shrub while preserving its natural form. This 'selective' or 'natural' pruning only needs to be done once a year unless the plant is being over watered - which generates excessive growth.

Feather Dusters

Palm trees are another victim of excessive pruning. If there are only three or four fronds remaining after pruning, the tree has been pruned excessively and improperly. Only the lower leaves, the ones which have turned brown or are yellowing, should be removed. Pruning more than this can stress the tree and make it vulnerable to diseases and pests. If annual pruning is done in June, the bloom stalks can be removed at the same time.

Still Confused?

If you're in doubt about whether or not to prune a tree or shrub, then you probably shouldn't. Most plants require only annual pruning for optimum health; some need no pruning at all. But if you must prune, here are a few tips to use to help you succeed.

1. Determine your pruning goal. For trees, the age will determine the type and degree of pruning required. Trees 2 – 5 years old may require light pruning once or twice a year to direct growth. Mature trees seldom need pruning more than once every five years or so.
2. Know the proper time to prune.
3. Less pruning is often better. Some plants don't require pruning, only minor grooming. Never remove more than 25% of a plant's foliage in any year.

4. Remember your objectives: Safety, health and appearance - in that order.
5. Be patient. Sometimes it requires more than one season to achieve certain pruning objectives, especially things like restoration from storm damage.
6. Use the right tool depending on the size of the branch to be removed.
7. Make proper cuts with reference to the branch bark ridge and the branch collar on trees and to nodes and lateral branches on shrubs. (See references below)

Once you get started pruning it is often difficult to stop.
Try these ideas to prevent excessive pruning.

- ➔ Always begin with a plan and stop when you have accomplished your goal.
- ➔ Never prune a plant you love when you are angry.
- ➔ Begin with your fastest-growing, toughest plants. This way your enthusiasm may have worn off a bit before you get to your expensive or slow-growing plants.
- ➔ Don't clean up the clippings from your plant until you are done. This way it will remind you how much foliage you have removed.
- ➔ Stop periodically to assess what you have done and what is left to do.
- ➔ Ask someone to interrupt every half hour to see if you are finished yet.
- ➔ Never remove more than 25% of your plant in any one year. Removing more can starve or stress your plant making it vulnerable to sunburn, pests and diseases.

Best Time to Prune (Phoenix metro area)

Desert Adapted Trees	Early summer (May – early June)
Desert Adapted deciduous trees	During winter dormancy (January)
Conifers (pines, junipers, cypress)	During winter dormancy (January)
Citrus	Don't prune except for hazards or health
Spring-blooming shrubs	After bloom is finished
Summer-blooming shrubs	During winter dormancy (January/February)
Frost-sensitive shrubs and trees	Remove damaged foliage after danger of frost has passed (late February into March)

To learn more about the correct pruning of desert plants try "Pruning, Planting & Care", by Eric A. Johnson. It is filled with great information and step by step instructions. ISBN 0-9638236-5-1.

AZ1048 Care of Desert Adapted Plants - <http://cals.arizona.edu/pubs/water/az1048.pdf>

Be sure to visit the Town of Gilbert Water Conservation web pages for free landscape workshops, landscaping tips, water audits, frequently asked questions and more.

<http://www.ci.gilbert.az.us/water>

Make plans to attend our free Pruning Workshop
On Tuesday, March 22, 2005. Call 480-503-6098 for information or to register

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