

1999

Pruning: Tools of the Tirade

Dennis Hinkamp
Utah State University

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Recommended Citation

Hinkamp, Dennis, "Pruning: Tools of the Tirade" (1999). *All Archived Publications*. Paper 784.
http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/extension_histall/784

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GARDEN NOTES

PRUNING: TOOLS OF THE TIRADE

By Dennis Hinkamp

March 1999

Winter-14

Pruning elicits the unmistakable sounds of late winter. The air is filled with curses echoing from neighboring yards as newly purchased hand pruners are used for the first, and often the last, time. Colorful excuses come from reluctant pruners hoping to avoid the job.

Many things in this world are frustrating, but pruning should not be one of them, says Jerry Goodspeed, Extension horticulturist. It can be enjoyable and even relaxing if the proper techniques and tools are used.

“Most plants can be pruned using three tools: hand pruners, loppers and a hand saw,” he says.

There are basically two types of hand pruners, Goodspeed explains. The anvil-type pruner has a top blade that cuts against a lower anvil, or flat piece. If not kept sharp, these pruners have a tendency to crush and damage the wood left after a cut. These pruners work adequately for perennials but are not great when pruning shrubs and trees.

“For most woody plants I recommend the by-pass or hook and curve blade pruners,” he says. “They have the same action as a pair of scissors and, if kept sharp, make a clean cut that heals quickly.”

“Also, get a quality pair of hand pruners,” he adds. “There are many out there that I would refer to as disposable pruners. They last about a year and then their mechanisms wear out and the blade goes dull. Most quality pruners are a little more expensive but well worth the price. I have had mine for about 12 years and they still do a great job. Try to find a brand that offers replacement parts. It is cheaper to replace a spring than the whole pruner.”

Do not overwork hand pruners, Goodspeed says. If the limb or twig does not cut easily, use loppers. Wanna-be gardeners have been known to attempt cutting down a redwood with a 6-inch hand pruner before admitting they needed a bigger tool. Keep in mind the old adage, “if it doesn't fit, get a bigger hammer.”

“A good set of loppers is needed for cuts larger than about a half inch in diameter,” he explains. “They are also available in anvil or by-pass types. Again, I prefer the by-pass. They tend to make cleaner cuts and are usually easier to maintain and use. Handles come in lengths from around 15 to 30 inches.

“The longer the handle, the more leverage can be used when making a cut,” he adds. “I actually prefer smaller handled loppers. They are easier to work with and fit better into tight places in the tree without much trouble. Handles can be made from wood, hollow steel or aluminum or other metal materials. I prefer aluminum handles but also have a wooden pair.”

For the really big jobs, a hand saw should be used, Goodspeed says. A folding saw is a good choice because it is easy to carry and light weight. After using it, you can fold it up and slip it into a back pocket.

Like the rest of your tools, keep the saw sharp and in good repair, only using it when pruning, he says. A sharp saw makes a clean cut, which heals faster than a “hacked” branch.

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 9 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert L. Gilliland, Vice-President and Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Utah State University, Logan, Utah. (EP/03/1999/DF)