

How to Prune an Overgrown Garden

Judicious Editing

Avoid the temptation to just dive in and hack things back. As garden plantings mature, some plants are bound to become shaded out or develop odd forms due to competition with nearby plants. Keep the best plants and don't be afraid to remove or transplant those that no longer fit the current conditions.

Rejuvenation

Many garden shrubs can be renewed with modest selective pruning to remove the four-D's and to lightly thin the canopy. This is also an optimal approach for small garden trees.

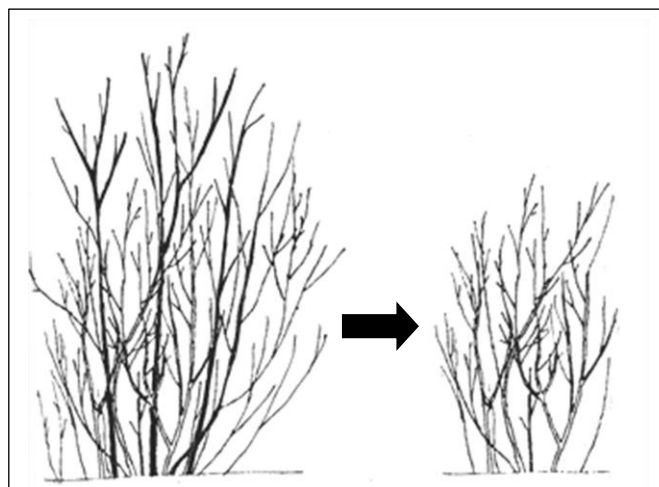
Keep the interior live branches on trees. Over-thinning can result in excessive water sprouts. Over time, it weakens the main branches and forces dense growth and weight toward the branch ends. Restore over-thinned trees by keeping some of the water sprouts to retrain as small lateral interior branches.

Remove the oldest, longest, or weakest stems on overgrown shrubs. Don't prune branch tips on the remaining stems. Remove up to 25% of the live stem area at one time. On multi-stem shrubs, cut the stems as close to soil level as possible to make way for new growth from the roots. By only removing the tallest stems every year or two, a consistent size can be easily maintained with fewer pruning cuts made less often.

Staged Shrub Renovation

Staged renovation uses "over thinning" of old growth, done in increments over a few seasons. The overall size and form of the shrub can be maintained in the landscape with no bare zones while waiting for new growth to come in. New growth will be more moderate. Staged renovation is less demanding on plant reserves and is a good option for less vigorous shrubs.

You can remove about one-half of the stems of multi-stem shrubs in late winter or early spring. When enough new growth develops to form a new canopy, remove the remaining old stems. Shrubs that have been sheared or rounded over can be restored to their natural habit by removing one-third of the old stems per year over a 3-year period. Remove stems as close to soil level as possible, or at a point of attachment on a larger lateral branch, placing cuts toward the inside of the plant.



Multi-stem shrubs: Remove the oldest, longest stems to reveal the smaller shrub within. Remove up to one-half of the stems over a couple seasons for staged renovation.

Drastic Renovation

Drastic (radical) renovation is best done in late winter or very early spring when new growth is most vigorous. Some shrub species can be rejuvenated by cutting away a majority, if not all, of the old growth. Be prepared to follow up during the growing season to thin out and tame excessive growth. Some of the multi-stem shrubs that respond well to being completely cut back and started over include:

Cornus -shrub dogwoods

Cotoneaster

Ilex – deciduous holly

Physocarpus - ninebark

Syringa – multi-stem lilacs

Callicarpa - beautyberry

Escallonia

Hardy fuchsia

Deciduous azaleas

Viburnum

Chaenomeles – flowering quince

Forsythia

Philadelphus – mock orange

Spirea

Weigela

Broadleaved evergreens that can be renovated through severe pruning back to a framework of bare stems include many types of *Rhododendron*, evergreen azalea, silk tassel (*Garrya*), boxwood, and Japanese holly. English yew (*Taxus*) can also be renovated this way.

Trees & Tree-like Shrubs

Trees cannot be renovated the way shrubs can. Rounding over and topping don't work and can permanently harm tree structure and health. Canopy size may be modestly reduced with selective pruning that preserves the natural structure. Hire an ISA Certified Arborist® for large tree care and pruning needs. Visit www.treesaregood.org for more information on tree pruning and care and how to hire an arborist.

Many older shrubs transition beautifully into small trees as they mature. Gradually remove lowest branches to develop a canopy area that is at least two-thirds the total height of the plant. Use selective pruning to lightly thin very dense branching. From here, continue to follow guidelines for pruning small trees.

A New Garden out of the Old

Rejuvenation and renovation pruning offer a sustainable opportunity to “replace” old plants on well-established root systems.

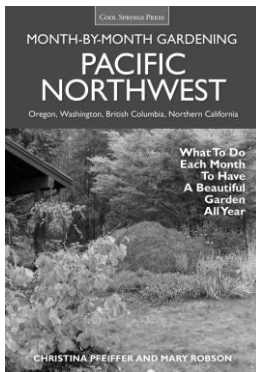
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Pacific Northwest Month-by-Month Gardening by Christina Pfeiffer with Mary Robson. Cool Springs Press