

Water-Wise Pruning Tips

In the south, trees and shrubs are often pruned between late November and early February.

Trees and shrubs have slightly [different techniques](#) for effective pruning, but they usually have one thing in common: it is better not to prune them at all, than to prune them incorrectly.

As a general rule, pruning should only be done in order to ensure safety or the health of the plant. Sometimes, however, homeowners prune without a defined goal for doing so. In many cases, trees and shrubs are either pruned too soon or too aggressively. This leaves stems exposed to the cold, and can cause uncontrolled and awkward re-growth in the spring.

When to Prune

After the first freeze, light pruning of diseased and dying branches, or branches that have extended into the sidewalk or roadway can be beneficial. To ensure the health of your plants, keep in mind a few guidelines before you pick up those shears.

How to Prune

Clean your pruning tools before making any cuts on a plant. Using clean, sharp tools well-suited to the pruning task at hand will help to prevent bark tear and fungal infection. If clean tools are used, wound dressing is generally considered unnecessary with one exception. After pruning oaks of any species, use pruning paint to prevent oak wilt.

Don't Over Do It

Prune with restraint. Don't scalp or top your trees and shrubs! Not only does tree topping result in aesthetically odd-looking plants, it also exposes the sensitive inner branch material to the harsh winter elements.

A good rule of thumb is to avoid removing more than 25 percent of the tree's canopy in one year. This is especially relevant for [crape myrtles](#), which are often over-pruned in the winter months in our region.

Keep in mind: a more natural look is usually better for the tree, and often better for your wallet.



Figure 1. Over-pruned crape myrtle tree.



Figure 2. Properly pruned crape myrtle tree, photo courtesy of [Clemson University](#).