Let's hope that the freeze this past week was our last, so we can start getting our landscapes into shape. One of the first things that you should do is prune your trees and shrubs. Deciduous trees, such as maples, sweet gums, sycamores, and crape myrtles, and certain shrubs should be pruned in the spring. Pruning will control the plants' growth, improve health, encourage flowering and fruiting, and enhance the overall appearance of the plants.

The main reason for pruning is to control the size and shape of plants. When plants grow out of that desired shape or height, they need to be pruned. It is possible, however, to reduce the amount of pruning in your landscape. Choosing the right plants for the right spots can reduce the frequency of pruning. When purchasing plants, always remember to take into account the mature height of the plant. For example, a shrub with a mature height of 6 feet should not be planted under a low window. This type of shrub will require constant pruning in order to keep the preferred height.

The health of plants can also be greatly improved by removing dead, damaged, and diseased branches. This can help to reduce the spread of diseases to healthy parts of the plant and to other shrubs and trees near by. Plants that produce flowers and fruit on new growth will benefit from pruning. Pruning promotes the new year's growth on trees and shrubs where the flowers and fruit will grow.

Removing dead, damaged, and diseased branches should be the first step in pruning shrubs. The next step is to remove any branches that touch each other, cross over each other, or just look out of place. If the shrub is still too large after removing these branches, cut back the older branches before younger ones, if possible. When cutting branches, cut back to a bud or lateral branch. This will create a neater looking shrub that does not have the appearance of just being pruned. It will also help to prevent disease from entering the shrub.

The tips of azaleas and camellias should be pruned soon after flowering. This will promote fullness of the shrub and set buds for next year's bloom. Summer and fall flowering shrubs, such as hibiscus, plumbago, thyallis, and roses, should be pruned in early March to promote the spring flowering.

Holly, boxwood, podocarpus, juniper, and most other evergreen shrubs can be pruned any time of the year. To encourage rapid growth, prune just before the first spring flush of new growth. To decrease the growth rate of shrubs, prune just after each flush of new growth.

When pruning trees, first remove all the dead and damaged branches. Next, select the best positioned and spaced branches and remove or shorten the rest. Branches should be positioned 6-24 inches apart, depending on the mature height of the tree. Do not cut tree branches flush with the trunk. Leave the shoulder of the branch. This will help protect the plant from diseases that could enter the wound.

Pruning is a landscape practice that should be done routinely. If not, overgrown, out-of-control plants will eventually be part of your landscape. This can create a problem when the plants are finally pruned. Brutally pruning back overgrown plants can damage them severely to the point where they may never recover.

The best landscape practice is to choose plants with their designated location and maximum height in mind. This will reduce the amount of time spent in the landscape pruning. For more information on pruning specific variety of plants or other plant related questions, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take calls, Monday to Friday from 10am to 2pm. Information can also be found at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG087.
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