With the cold weather nearly behind us and spring just around the corner, it is time to start thinking about pruning our landscape plants. Pruning is a horticulture term for trimming or removing plant parts and is an essential landscaping practice. Proper pruning of landscape plants will help to control the plants' growth, improve the health of the plants, encourage flowering and fruiting, and enhance their overall appearance.

The main purpose of 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. Although many landscape plants can be pruned at this time, there are some that cannot. Pruning at the wrong time of year for some plants can be harmful, resulting in no flowers, no fruit or even death.

Consider the time of year when plants bloom to help determine when to prune flowering plants. Plants such as azaleas, India hawthorn, camellias, and redbuds bloom in the late winter and early spring, so by trimming now, this year's flower buds will be removed. Therefore, it is best to delay trimming spring flowering plants until after bloom.

Plants that bloom during the summer such as hibiscus, allamanda, oleander, roses, bottlebrush, and princess flower can be trimmed now. By pruning just before the spring growth, it will create fuller branches and promote more summer bloom. Even just trimming the tips of the twigs will promote more shoots and flower buds on the plants. Evergreen shrubs can be pruned anytime of the year.

Removing dead, damaged, and diseased branches should be the first step in pruning shrubs. The next step is to remove any branches that may 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, make the cut at 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.

Deciduous trees, such as maples, sweet gums, sycamores, and crape myrtles should be pruned in the spring. 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 branch collar (swollen area where the branch meets the trunk) of the branch. This will help protect the plant from diseases that could enter the wound. Leave the hard work to a professional. A certified arborist should do drastic pruning of large trees if you are unsure of where to cut or do not have the proper equipment to do so.

Restrain from incorrectly pruning crape myrtles. It is not necessary to cut off the limbs at the same point each year. Crape myrtles will still produce beautiful flowers and maintain a nice shape by only removing branches that are no thicker than the size of a pencil. A study done by the University of Florida shows that by correctly pruning crape myrtles, they will actually produce double the amount of blooms and less suckers (plants growing from the base of the tree). Therefore, there is no need for such drastic pruning as is often seen around town. That is an old, out-of-date, practice that should not be done anymore.

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 severely damage them to the point where they may never recover.
It is possible, however, to reduce the amount of pruning in your landscape. Choosing the right plants for the right sight can reduce the frequency of pruning. When purchasing plants, always remember to take into account their mature height. For example, a shrub with a mature height of 10 feet should not be planted under a low window. This type of shrub will require constant pruning in order to keep it at the preferred height.

If you have any questions on pruning or for specifics on pruning trees, please contact the Osceola County Extension Service. The Master Gardeners can be reached at (321)697-3000. The Master Gardeners now have new hours. They are available to take calls on Monday-Friday from 10am to 2pm.

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