Now that spring is approaching, it is time to get the landscapes back in shape. The past couple of months have been tough for our landscape plants, with three hurricanes and cooler weather affecting them. However, now they are ready to be revived, and pruning will help to give them a good start.

It is time to prune most perennials, shrubs, and deciduous trees, such as maples, sweet gums, sycamores and crape myrtles. Pruning will control the plant's growth, improve health, encourage flowering and fruiting, and enhance the overall appearance of the plants. Plants that grow out of a desired shape or height need to be pruned.

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 or more 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 will help to reduce the spread of diseases to healthy parts of the plant and to other shrubs and trees nearby. Plants that produce flowers and fruit on new growth, such as crape myrtles, 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, and also help to prevent disease.

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, thryallis 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 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 to 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.

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