It's almost time to prune but gardeners should still be cautious and hold off on the hacking. We still have time for a few more cold spells.

Pruning is a horticulture term for trimming or removing plant parts. Time of pruning is important to the health of plants. Pruning at the wrong time can be harmful to plants and result in no flowers, no fruit or even plant death. Improper pruning can result in unsightly or hazardous growth.

Leaves and twigs of some shrubs have been killed by the cold but parts of the plant near the ground could still be alive. Most damaged shrubs will sprout new growth soon. Though they look ugly until new growth begins, it is best to delay pruning until you can evaluate the extent of the damage. Once new sprouts appear, trim down below the new growth to remove all of the dead stems.

Wait to trim deciduous fruits such as peaches, pears, apples, grapes and figs for a few more weeks. It is generally safe by mid to late February. These plants go dormant during the cold winter weather, but pruning the ends of the branches triggers chemical changes that promote growth. If the new growth sprouts and we have another frost or freeze, the new shoots will be damaged.

Consider when plants bloom when determining when to prune flowering plants. Azaleas, dogwoods, spireas, India hawthorn, camellias, fringe trees, magnolias, and red buds bloom in the late winter and early spring. If you trim now, you remove this spring's flowers. Therefore, it is best to delay trimming until after bloom for best growth and flowering next year.

Plants that bloom during the summer such as hibiscus, allamanda, abelia, oleander, roses, crape myrtle, cassia, bottlebrush, and princess flower can be trimmed just before spring growth to promote better branching and more summer bloom. Pinching or trimming just the tips of the twigs will promote more shoots and flower buds. Cutting older branches, wood larger than a pencil, forces excessive sprouting at one place and is unhealthy.

Resist the incorrect pruning of crape myrtles. Don't lop off limbs at the same point each year. The plant responds by developing large fists of multiple branches and will later need major corrective pruning. Crape myrtles will produce beautiful flowers and maintain their shape if you only prune branches the size of your finger. There is no need for such drastic pruning as is often seen around town.

Structural pruning, trimming out dead limbs or removing major branches, can be done any time if done properly. Remove the limb or branch where it attaches to a major limb to avoid excessive shoot growth at the cut. Research has shown pruning paint is unnecessary in our humid Florida climate. Wounds will callus or heal over quickly if made just before or just after spring growth.

Avoid heavy pruning of trees and shrubs during the time of shoot elongation. This is the time when the buds are expanding and leaves are enlarging on the new stems. Hormones produced at the shoot tips promote root growth and pruning during this stage of growth can be harmful to the development of roots.

Follow University of Florida recommendations when making pruning cuts to promote rapid healing. Do not cut the limbs flush with the trunk and do not leave a stub. Request Circular 853 from the Osceola County Extension Office by calling 407-846-4181 or find it on the web on the EDIS key word link from http://osceola.ifas.ufl.edu. The diagrams will help you prune properly and have healthy, low maintenance trees and shrubs.
Eleanor Foerste
Natural Resources Agent
Osceola County Extension/University of Florida
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
(321) 697-3000
Fax (321) 697-3010
efoe@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
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