

Pruning a Spring-Flowering Shrub

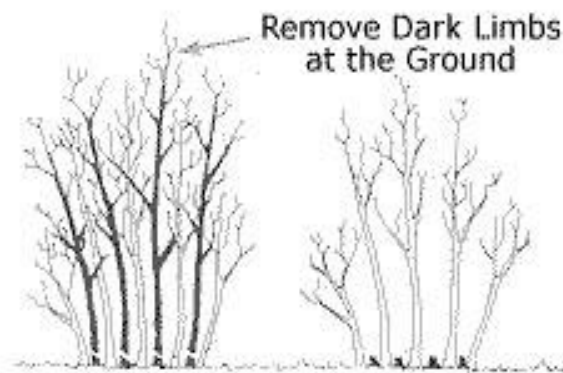
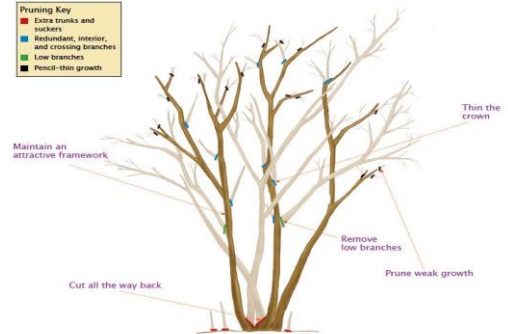
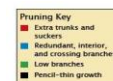
Many deciduous shrubs flower in spring, providing a beautiful and often fragrant backdrop for the early-season garden. Shrubs such as mock orange, barberry, deutzia, forsythia, honeysuckle, lilac, weigela, and spring-flowering forms of spiraea are also easy to care for, requiring only basic watering, fertilizing, and pruning. It is important, however, to prune these shrubs soon after the flowers fade, since this is when they begin to develop the new growth that will mature over summer and fall and produce flowers next spring. If you wait to prune until winter, when the plant is dormant, you risk cutting off much of this mature wood and significantly reducing the amount of bloom.

Remove Dead and Crossing Branches

When pruning, aim to retain and enhance the shrub's naturally graceful habit, taking care not to cut it into a boxy or unnatural shape.

Before starting, it's a good idea to clear out fallen leaves and other debris from the plant's crown and the area beneath its branches so you can see the whole plant.

Using pruning shears or, if necessary, heavy-duty loppers, prune out any obviously dead branches, cutting them flush to the ground. Also remove any branches that seem diseased or abnormal, and those that cross each other awkwardly or rub together.

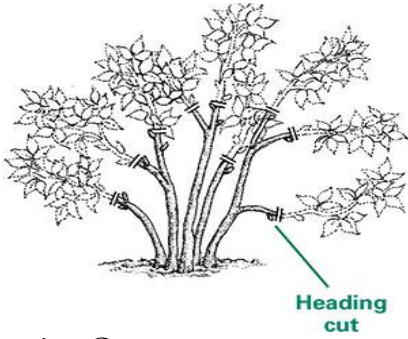


Renewal Pruning

In time, the branches of old vigorous-growing shrubs tend to become overcrowded, preventing the oldest stems from producing sturdy new side shoots. To give the shrub renewal strength, let light and air into the center of the plant, and provide growing space for new flowering stems, cut about one-fifth to one-third of the oldest canes back to the ground. Repeat the process next year if the shrub seems to need further thinning.

If some overly long stems remain, consider shortening them, but keep in mind that branches cut back partway often give rise to a dense profusion of new shoots, making the shrub appear even more overgrown. Cut these stems back to just

above a side branch that is growing in the direction you want, usually away from the center of the plant. This way new growth will be concentrated in one side branch rather than in several new shoots.



Deadhead Flowering Stems

You can begin this phase of the project while the plant is still blooming by cutting a few branches for fragrant bouquets. Then, immediately after the flowers have faded, selectively remove the dead blossoms, cutting each stem back to a pair of young laterals, or side shoots. These shoots will continue to grow over the summer, forming buds for next year's blossoms.

Routine Care

Besides proper pruning, some routine maintenance will keep your spring-flowering shrub healthy and blooming prolifically. If you haven't already fertilized this spring, do so after pruning. Use an all-purpose fertilizer, such as 5-10-10, spreading it lightly in a circle around the outer edges of the branches. Thoroughly water it into the soil. A mulch of aged compost, shredded leaves or straw will benefit the shrub by conserving moisture and preventing most weed growth. Though an established shrub is able to endure considerable drought, it will flower more reliably if you help it through dry weather with a weekly watering.