

GET READY TO PRUNE!

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The holidays usually signal that it's time to begin pruning deciduous fruit trees and ornamental trees and shrubs. To make this job easier, make sure you have the proper pruning tools to do a good job. Tools for pruning range from small hand shears for use on ornamentals and hedges to large pruning saws for use on tree branches. Some of the tools used for pruning are described below.

Hand Pruners

Curved bypass pruners give the cleanest cut. Make sure they have a sturdy frame, a spiral-type spring between the handles, replaceable blades and a nonslip grip. Reputable manufacturers can always supply replacement parts if needed. When pruning a branch, hold the pruners so that the upper blade is toward the part of the branch that remains on the plant. This way, any damage that might occur will be on the pruned branch instead of the one left on the plant. Anvil pruners have a cutting blade that is pushed against a metal sole, or anvil. These tend to cost less than bypass pruners and are less likely to twist when cutting larger branches, but they crush wood as they cut and leave a stub. For this reason, I prefer bypass pruners.

Loppers

These long-handled tools are used for cutting branches too large or too tough for hand pruners, but not large enough for a saw. Avoid using an anvil model except for cutting dead wood and buy bypass-type loppers instead.

Pruning Saws

Use a bow saw for heavy-duty cutting of large tree branches. The teeth on these saws cut on both the push and pull strokes, and the handle allows good clearance. A regular pruning saw is good for cutting branches 1-3" in diameter and the teeth cut on the pull stroke. Pole pruners are those that can reach up high into a tree, freeing you from having to climb on a ladder, but are useful only on branches about an inch or so thick. Some come in one piece while others have poles of interlocking pieces.

Hedge Trimmers

There are electric and gas-powered hedge trimmers which do a good job on plants like conifers, boxwood, privet, etc. However, for broadleaf plants like laurel, hedge trimmers tend to damage the foliage too much, so use hand pruners. It's very easy to over-trim using these tools, so cut lightly at first and go over the hedge a second time if necessary. Choosing which power trimmer to use is a personal choice, but there are some things to keep in mind. Electric trimmers are less expensive, almost maintenance free and very lightweight. However, keeping the electric cord out of the way is an important safety issue and buying one with a cord that is brightly colored is

very helpful. Hold the cord over your shoulder and be aware of it at all times. There are cordless trimmers that are powered by a rechargeable battery, and will operate between charges for a finite period of time. These are ideal for use on small hedges and topiaries that need regular care. Gas-powered models are more powerful, but they cost more and make a lot of noise. Single-blade trimmers enable you to cut branches up to an inch in diameter while double-bladed models allow trimming back and forth.

No matter which tool you use, properly maintaining them will help them last a life time, will help to make them easier to use and will give cleaner cuts on stems and branches. Regularly lubricate the pivot areas of pruners, clean sticky resin or sap off blades and sharpen blades when necessary. Wiping the blades with a light machine oil after cleaning will prevent rust from forming. Also, hedge trimmer blades should be stored in a plastic sheath to prevent damage when not in use.

For more information on proper pruning techniques, attend the free Master Gardener class on “Pruning Fruit Trees” on Saturday, January 8, 2011. The class starts at 9 AM and will be held in the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer pruning questions as well as other home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. Walk-ins are welcome. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master_Gardener/. Our January schedule of classes is now available and can be downloaded from this website.

Even though it's cold outside, spring will be here before you know it. Plan to come to the 2nd Master Gardener Spring Plant Sale on Saturday, April 16th at the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville. The sale promises a great selection of perennials and annuals as well as vegetable starts. In addition, Master Gardeners will be giving demonstrations on popular gardening topics. Don't miss it!