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Most Pruning is Done in February

February is the best month for pruning for most plants that benefit from pruning. Not every plant needs to be pruned. Plants that bloom early in the spring should be pruned only after they bloom. A common blunder in pruning is to cut out excessive amounts of the flowering wood. Avoiding that result requires that the gardener be familiar with the flowering characteristics of the plants in the landscape.

The usual way to prune is with thinning cuts. Removal of the branch at its intersection with the next larger branch. The thinning cuts maintain the structure and natural shape of the plant as they reduce height or open up the plant. Hedging cuts are made in the middle of the branch. Hedging cuts leave a stub and more drastically change the form of the remaining plant. Hedging cuts are usually a less desirable way to prune.

 To lead the list for February pruning are the semi-tropical plants that freeze back to the roots every winter. The list includes the blue salvias, poinciana, esperanza, duranta, firebush and lantanas. We usually cut them off at ground level but because of the mild winter this year, so far, you may have some choice on how much to remove. Duranta and esperanza stems in many areas will not be frozen back. It is not necessary, but if you leave some of the live wood you will have larger plants over the summer.

Each of the fruit species has a unique recommended pruning technique. Peaches are pruned to open up the middles for light penetration and air movement. Height is also controlled with pruning. If the trees are pruned to a height of 8 ft. or less, the fruit can usually be harvested from the ground. By opening up the middle for the light and air access, the fruit has better color and is less likely to be attacked by fungus diseases. Peach trees produce the year’s crop on wood produced the year before. It is recognizable by its red color. The new wood that is left after pruning needs to be structurally capable of supporting the peaches that develop.

Hybrid tea roses bloom on new wood that will develop this growing season. Pruning is designed to remove excess old wood and to provide a structure for the new wood. Only 3 or 4 main stems are left. They should emerge from the base above the graft and extend at about a 60 degree angle from the base. Like the peach trees, rose blooms benefit if the middle is open to air and light.

The tough modern roses such as Knockout and old-fashioned roses such as Martha Gonzales or Mrs. Dudley Cross require less pruning. Pruning in February can be limited to removing dead wood and controlling height or width.

Crape myrtles also bloom on new wood of the season but the pruning recommendation has changed in recent years. Crape myrtles pruned with a few thinning cuts to remove dead or excessive stems is deemed more desirable than using hedging cuts to leave stubs that serve as a base for new growth. Both pruning strategies result in attractive blooms but the stubbing alters the natural form of the crape myrtle.

Visit plantanswers.com for more information on pruning plants such as hedges, conifers, and other fruit species. Diagrams are available to help guide the pruning cuts.