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**“Pruning”**

February is the prime month for pruning. After a mild winter last year, we had to decide how many of the normally cold-sensitive plants were actually killed by freezing temperatures. Esperanza, duranta and even lantana, firebush and poinciana were only partially frozen. If we left the green stems, the plants bloomed faster and grew larger during the summer.

This spring, expect all of the root-hardy, cold-sensitive plants to completely freeze. Prune them to the ground.

Fruit trees and roses are usually not damaged by cold weather. Prune them to open up the middle and strengthen the structure to carry large healthy blooms and fruit.

Many of us are on a campaign to reduce the severe pruning that has become common on crepe myrtles. They bloom on new wood, but it is not necessary to chop the stems up to stubs to stimulate new wood production. This year, try trimming off the dead wood. If you fertilize with slow release lawn fertilizer and minimize pruning, you will have as many blooms as the butchered plants produced without creating a nightmare of stubs.

There is also a large selection of sizes and shapes of the versatile crepe myrtle plant. If you purchase new crepe myrtles, select a variety with the color of flowers that you want, but also select the size and shape that fits into the designated site you have for it in the landscape. If you select well, very little pruning will be required.

For peaches and roses, look to cut off all dead stems first. Don’t leave stubs, but make the pruning cuts at the origin of the dead stems with another stem. Next, cut any large stems growing from outside stems back into the middle of the plant. The idea is to open up the middle to the air and light to maximize bloom wood and reduce disease pressure.

After cutting out the dead branches and stems, remove the stems that are growing straight up from the middle of the plant or from horizontal branches. They are easily recognizable because they have grown fast and there is a lot of space between leaf buds. These stems rarely produce any flowers or fruit.

A good way to visualize the finished product is to see an open vase enclosed in three to five stems extending out 60 degrees from the main trunk.

Also, cut any suckers growing directly from the root stock. Suckers don’t produce desirable fruit or flowers and if allowed to survive, will often overgrow the desirable grafted top of the plant.

To protect the smooth bark from sun burn, leave some of the small stems and leaves on the interior of the plant. Those stems are what growers refer to when they talk about “trashy middles”.

Apples, pears and to a lesser extent plums, require less pruning than peaches. The fruit may be produced on old wood making the pruning more complex. Peaches produce fruit on new wood.

Citrus can tolerate almost any pruning. They can be pruned flat or squat, but they also don’t need much pruning. Remove dead and wayward branches, but it is best to let the citrus tree grow to its natural shape.

If you attempt to control height, use thinning cuts as much as possible. Thinning cuts remove the offending stem at its origin, as opposed to a cut in the middle of the stem.

**Garden Tasks**

Plant potatoes with pieces of seed potato placed in a 1-foot deep trench. Cover the potatoes with 3 inches of soil and fill the trench further as the stems emerge.

Fertilize the snapdragons and other annuals. They will begin their winter flush of bloom later in the month.

It is too early to fertilize the lawn, but you can aerate and top dress.

Ball moss does not hurt your trees, but it can be controlled with a copper spray like Kocide. Follow label instructions.