**Weekly Express-News Article**

**By Calvin R. Finch, PhD, SAWS Director, and Horticulturist**

Saturday, January 28, 2012

Best Pruning Time

February is considered the best month to prune most plants that require pruning. It is an important point that not everything needs to be pruned.

We prune to remove dead and diseased wood, to control size, to maintain a desired shape, and to encourage blooms and/or fruit. Shade trees are also pruned to remove threatening branches or open them up to allow more sun to penetrate to the lawn. In general we leave shade tree pruning to the professionals with the knowledge, right equipment and insurance. Most other pruning jobs can be handled with loppers, pruners, and a pole or hand saw. Even for the small jobs use good equipment that is sharp.

The most obvious need for pruning is to remove the freeze killed wood on the cold sensitive plants such as lantanas, duranta, esperanza, and poinciana. Most of the time the best option is to cut the stems to the ground to make room for new growth. After mild winter’s some of the plants, especially esperanza and duranta may have stems or portions of stems that escape a complete dieback. The live wood can be left by pruning off the dead wood. This is the usual situation with citrus as well.

Fruit trees, roses, and crape myrtles are pruned to encourage high quality blooms and or fruit.

Each fruit species is pruned differently. For a peach tree first remove all suckers that emerges from the root system at the base of the tree. Second cut out all dead and diseased branches at their origin in a live branch. The main scaffolding of the tree is provided by 3 or 4 branches, they emerge from different points of the central trunk. The scaffold branches should extend from the trunk at about a 60º angle for maximum strength. The middle of the enclosure formed by the scaffolds is cleared out to allow air and sun to penetrate. The fruit bearing wood is last year’s growth that emerges from the side branches that emerge from the scaffold. A wine glass with the trunk as the stem and the growth on the scaffolds as the thick sides of the glass should remain. Height is reduced by beginning with the highest branch and cutting it at its origin. The next highest branch is then cut and so forth until height is reduced to 8 feet or less so that the ripe peaches can be reached from the ground.

Plums and even hybrid tea roses can also be pruned to this general pattern.

Apples and pears are generally pruned by a method called modified central leader. The trunk (central leader) extends through the center of the tree and side branches emerge from the central leader in a manner that resembles a spiral stair case.

Crape myrtles, like roses, produce their blooms on current year’s wood. The idea of stimulating growth of this new wood has been the justification for the severe pruning to which crape myrtles have been subjected. A healthy crape myrtle will produce new wood and bloom without the necessity to hedge the plant down to stubs. The stubs work, but you get as much bloom from a more natural shape and I think the plant is more attractive. Try this minimal approach to pruning crape myrtles this year and compare the results.

For shrubs such as pomegranate, nandina, viburnums, boxwood, and pittosporum that have gotten leggy or are dominated by old stems, remove up to one third of the old stems every couple of years. The strategy is especially important for plants that are hedged. The smaller young stems are easier to hedge and more readily produce foliage to fill in the hedge.

For early spring blooming plants such as climbing roses, redbuds, Texas mountain laurel, ornamental pears, and ornamental peaches, wait and prune them after they bloom in the spring.

For instructions and diagrams on pruning other plants visit “[www.plantanswers.com](http://www.plantanswers.com).”