



## English Laurels, English Holly and Photinia

by Cass Turnbull

What do all these plants have in common? They all have large evergreen leaves, they break bud easily, and they eventually grow into either very large shrubs or relatively small trees.

### **SECOND BEST FOR HEDGES**

These qualities mean that holly, laurel and photinia are widely used as sheared hedges by impatient people. The truly best hedges are slower growing with finer leaves (yew, privet, boxwood, Japanese holly). Finer leaves look more elegant. Slower growing means less work. The nicest hedge I know is a Blue Atlas Cedar hedge. It's fifteen feet high. But only the very wealthy and devoted can afford such hedges. If you miss pruning one year and it gets away from you, you're sunk. Unlike the above plants, you can't make conifer hedges small again, except yews. They can't break bud and green back up if cut back hard.

### **NO PRUNING**

If your photinia, laurel or holly looks good and isn't in the way of anything, just leave it alone. If you want to help make it look better, taking out the dead wood almost always improves the appearance of any plant. Otherwise, if it's not broken, don't fix it.

### **SELECTIVE PRUNING**

The above named shrubs make good mass plantings for background and informal hedges in the eight to twelve foot range. If let go entirely, they can easily grow to twice that size. Don't try to keep them much smaller than eight to twelve feet, because it won't work. Above that, they can be selectively pruned to shorten them or to tidy them up. Even though these shrubs can take frequent, hard pruning, it's usually the gardener who gives up because it really is too much work.

To prune selectively, locate the tallest or widest offending branch, follow it down *inside* the plant to where it meets up with a side branch or parent stem and then cut it off there. Use a hand pruner or lopper of good quality. Then locate and shorten the next worst branch. It is very important to hide those

cuts down inside the plant. It's the difference between selective pruning and shearing your shrub a twig at a time. After pruning for a while your shrub should look natural but shorter and tidier.

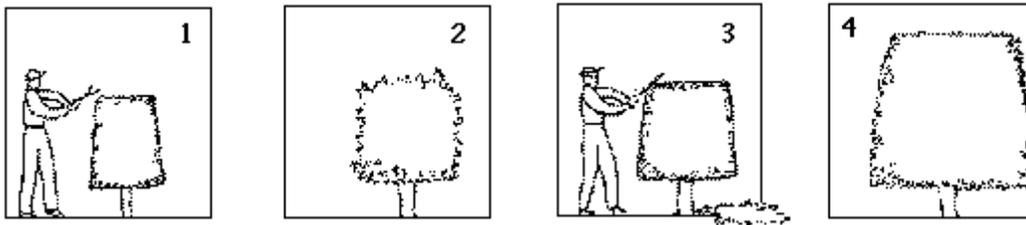
## **SHEARING AS A HEDGE**

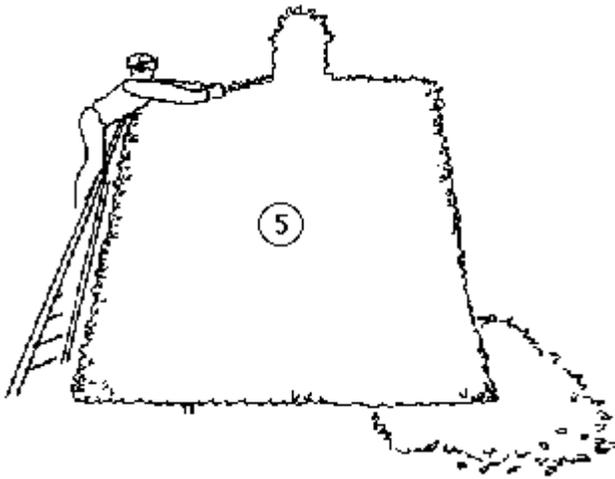
The big-leaved, evergreen bud-breakers are often planted as a formal hedge. If so, go ahead and shear them. Use either hedge shears or power shears. If you don't have one, rent a three-legged ladder. They are more stable on uneven ground than the house painter variety. Also the third leg can be threaded through or into the hedge, making it easier for you to get "up-close and personal" with your plants.

The more often your hedge is sheared, the denser and better it looks. As with all formal hedges, it is advised that the top be slightly narrower than the base. This is to prevent the top from outgrowing and shading the base, which then loses leaves and turns into barren, useless trunks. A narrower top also helps keep your hedge from being pulled apart by heavy snow loads.

English laurel often looks tattered and stubby after a shearing. This can be improved by going back over it with a lopper or hand pruner to cut out the worst of the sliced leaves or barren branches. Some people have been known to selectively prune as much as thirty feet of laurel hedge, though this becomes quite tedious after a few years. It is too labor-intensive for such a common and uneventful plant. Reserve that kind of determined effort for your wisteria vine.

Photinia is just a dressed up laurel, in my opinion. It's claim to fame is that its new growth is reddish or coppery colored. I guess I can still remember when I was mightily impressed and longed to possess some. Every time photinia is sheared it flushes out more interesting red leaves. Actually any plant is valuable when given a situation requiring its highest and best use. Both laurel and photinia are somewhat tender in this region, so be careful not to stimulate a late flush of growth by shearing it in the fall. It might not have time to harden off for the winter and will suffer freeze damage.





1. First shear
2. Regrowth
3. Second shear
4. Five year shear
5. Twelve year shear

Both laurel and photinia serve useful functions as fast growing screens, though most horticulturalists would turn their noses up at the idea. Less hard to accept is the practice of using them in general landscaping. One sees them everywhere, repeatedly sheared into meaningless boxes and balls. Each year they get a little bigger and more unwieldy. What a waste of maintenance dollars. It's like advertising bad taste in landscaping.

However, I must confess a slight fondness for the giant holly gumdrops seen around town here and there. If such holly bushes are sheared every year from the time they are small, they develop an incredibly thick and twiggy interior. Topiarians can then strap their twenty foot ladders directly onto the bush when they go up for the annual trimming. Even so, it's a painful and expensive proposition. Hug a holly? Not me! Occasionally someone cuts the top off of one of these gumdrops, because, well, because it's gotten "too big". This won't hurt the holly, but it can be a visual disaster when the chainsaw reveals a trunk surrounded by a saggy donut of dead-looking branches.

## **RADICAL RENOVATION**

The good news is these three plants can stand to be radically renovated. I once saw a full-sized holly, chainsawed into the utterly leafless shape of a lava lamp. Next year it flushed out and looked great. Radical renovations of laurel hedges are common in this area. In the early spring one saws the overgrown hedge into the desired shape, except perhaps a foot smaller than the final desired size. That's because it will need that room to resprout and be sheared into a thick green coat again. Be sure to cut your hedge narrow as well as short. It should be narrow enough for one gardener to reach across with a hedge shear. I have only seen one laurel hedge that didn't recover from this radical treatment. It has remained a perfectly square bundle of dead-looking sticks for years. I always want to stop the truck and ask the person inside the house what he did to kill it. But I guess that

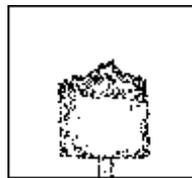
wouldn't be polite. Van Bobbitt cautions us to avoid heavy pruning on a hot July or August day as we might burn up some internal leaves or scald the bark. If you renovate in the winter, you must stare at the ugly barren branches till spring. Spring provides the longest period of benign wet weather, which will help the plant to regrow.



Radical Renovation It begins again

## ARBORIZING

I don't much care for laurels, hollies and photinias as hedges or bushes, but I think they make great small trees. Novices, especially people in view covenant communities, are always asking for small trees. Neophytes always request evergreen plants, too. They are under the twin delusions that evergreens don't shed leaves, and that deciduous plants disappear in the winter.



*Brown Donut Top  
On Holly Gumdrops*

When my good friends Bruce and Deb moved into their new home in Port Townsend, they inquired about what to do with the twenty-foot laurel bush totally obscuring the living room window. "Limb it up and be done with it!" I replied. It turned out to have a lovely thick and sinuous trunk. Now it's a tree under which to store the firewood. There is just enough screening from the street and just enough light is let in the window. And the birds love it for the berries. I suspect that the delight of bird watching is one of those pleasures that develops later in life. I don't recall being so impressed by them in my college days. But then it wasn't birds I was watching.

Arborizing, which means turning a shrub into a tree, is best done on very mature plants. Before doing anything rash, take a look inside and visualize how it will look stripped up. Are the trunks nice and thick, or will it look like an ostrich once it's limbed up?. A little general thinning and cutting out of dead wood will make the crown look its best too. And don't try arborizing everything in sight. Moderation in all things is the watchword.

