

PlantAmnesty ▲▲▲

Forsythias

by Cass Turnbull

I guess we all cut our pruner's teeth on forsythias. Like many plants in the "cane-grower" category, these shrubs are planted mostly for their flowers, not for their form. They do have a reasonably nice fall coloring which many people tend to forget. The yellow blooms on forsythias come out in February or March, and they flower before their leaves emerge. After the long drab, gray winter, the sight of these bright yellow explosions lifts our spirits. I like to prune forsythias just before they bloom (and bring some branches in to force in a vase of water). Because of it, I get a lot of people asking, "Isn't the right time to prune just after blooming?" Well, no, not unless you are cutting a forsythia to the ground or shearing it (ick). More on timing later.



They get big!

MISTAKES PEOPLE MAKE:

The other thing people never seem to grasp is that all plants, including forsythias have a height and width that is genetically programmed into them, and **pruning really can't keep them under a certain size (for any reasonable time)**. That size for most forsythias is seven to ten feet tall and about as wide. When you buy a plant at the nursery, it's just a fraction of its adult size. You imagine the shrub will grow to about 5' tall and 4' wide and put it in a place that such a shrub would fit. Eventually, quite soon in fact, it doesn't. Fit that is. Then I'm apt to hear, "It's too big, it's out of control, it's gone crazy," when actually it's just grown up. The initial reaction is to cut back the so-called overgrown shrub (and make it into a tidy globe too). Next year this results in an upsurge of straight, ugly, even-wilder shoots arising from the end of each cut tip (the common result of non-selective heading). If you know something about pruning, you might selectively head-back branches to nice laterals (side branches) or remove a quarter to a third of the canes (cutting them to the ground) each year. You will maintain the natural fan, fountain or vase shape of a forsythia and stop it from continuing

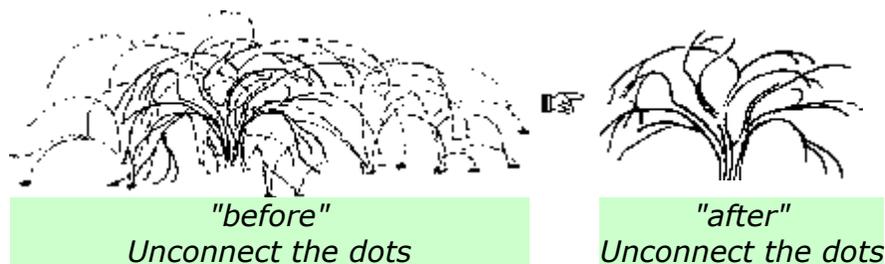
up to twelve to fifteen feet tall and eighteen feet wide. But you will not, trust me, be able to keep a mature plant under eight feet tall. It's just too much work. The harder you prune, the faster it grows. In the end, you will do what was recommended in the first place, move it to a location where it has room to live as a grown-up.

THE TROUBLE WITH FORSYTHIAS:

Forsythias, almost as much as quinces, have a disturbing winter silhouette. It's a mess. This untidy appearance leads to much malpruning done in an effort to smooth out the perimeter into a globe. The winter aspect is then a jumble of crossing twigs shaped into a ball, followed the next season with a ton of ugly new shoots as described above. Not much of an improvement, I'd say and certainly too much work.

Not all shrubs have a great winter structure like a witch hazel or a tidy perimeter like a rhody. Forsythias are sort of the Isadora Duncans of the plant world. They want to be wild and free. Judicious thinning will relieve some of the crossing, crowded branches, but not all. It's just one of those plants it doesn't pay to look at too closely. At its best, a forsythia's form looks like a vase of large, arching feathers.

The other problem is that, like blackberries, they tip root. When the branches (called canes) dip over from their own weight and the tips touch the ground, they will sprout roots and begin a new shrub. In this manner a single shrub can eventually colonize a whole hill side, and run through many neighboring shrubs. When you prune, it is advised to cut out, or cut back these canes and rip up the wandering rooted shrublets. You corral it back to the original shrub. Don't worry about using shovels, loppers or a mattock to get them out. You won't hurt what's left. If you're smart, you pot them up and donate them to the PlantAmnesty plant sale.

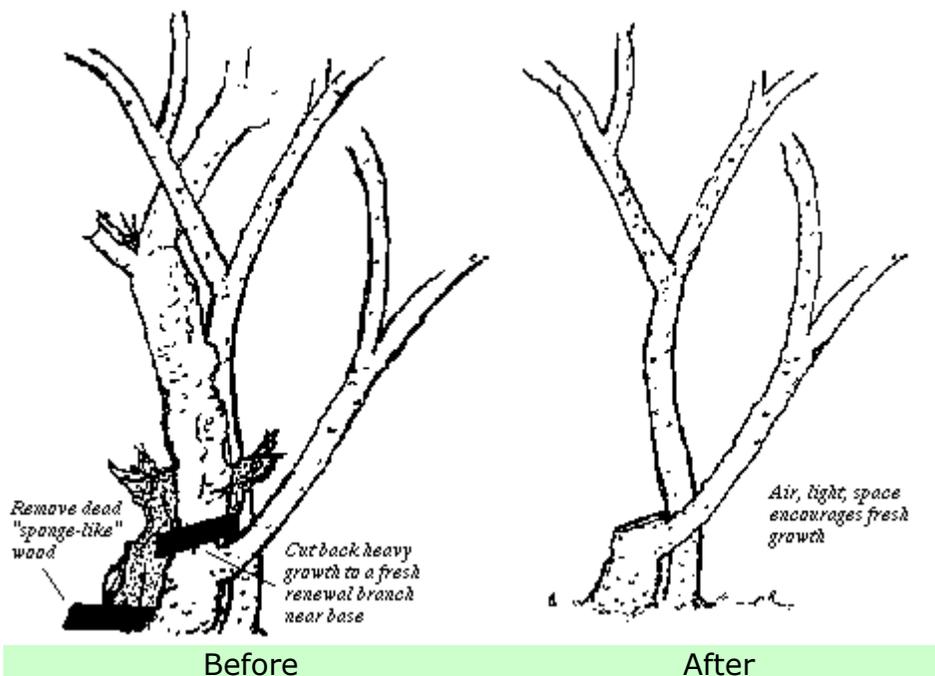


TRADITIONAL PRUNING:

The traditional method of pruning a forsythia is to cut (with loppers or saw) canes out at the base. The limit is generally set at a third of the total shrub, although you can, in fact, cut the entire shrub down (coppicing or radical

renovation) and it will all be back in twelve months. When you cut out the biggest, tallest canes (as fat as four inches) you are left with a smaller plant. You are also renewing growth, as new shoots will arise from the ground or low stub where you cut. These new shoots are very thin, very straight, and very rapidly growing, with few flowers and long spaces between the nodes. Eventually they arch over, put on side branches and add flowers, becoming the new replacement canes. Sometimes a cut cane just dies, becoming dead wood for some future gardener to remove. Like a volleyball game you are rotating the players. You remove old canes, and usually stimulate some new growth that will become new canes.

Not only does removing tall canes result in a somewhat smaller plant, it also thins it out, making it seem less cluttered to the observer (most pruning, you know, is done to keep the homeowner calm). To begin pruning this plant, you first stare into your shrub (most easily done in the winter when the leaves are off). Follow several canes from the tip down to the base. Your job is to locate a few of the very worst crossing, rubbing, wrong way (meaning it starts on the outside and heads back through the center and out the other side) canes and cut them off at or near (eg. 3") the ground. Sometimes the selected victim is so wrapped around other canes you must cut it in several places and take it out in pieces. You pull the the canes down slowly using the weight of your body to tug them out. Or sometimes you can toss them up and out of a very overgrown shrub. Mind your eyes! Safety glasses are a good idea. I know many gardeners who have suffered significant eye injuries.



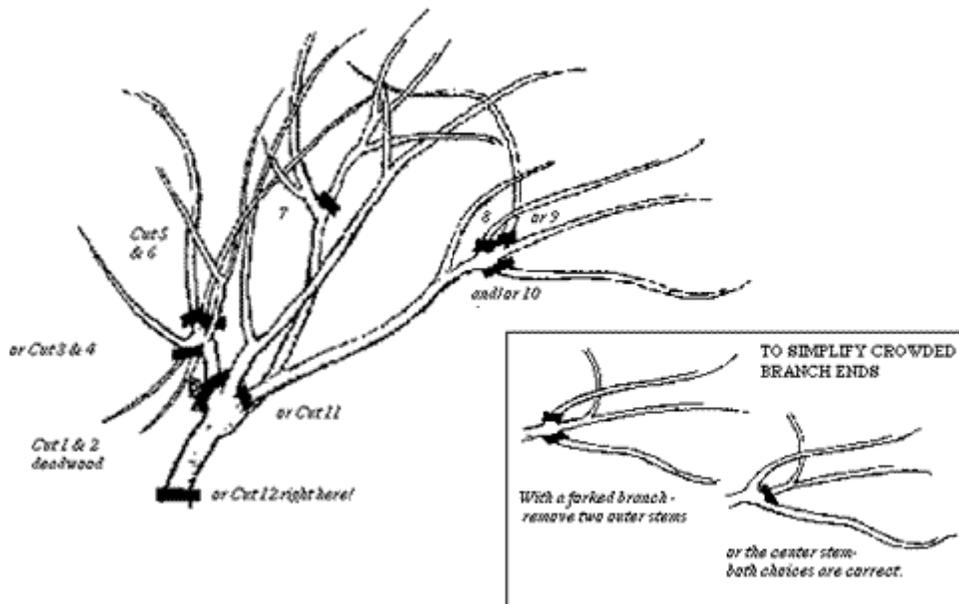
THE POSITION:

You approach the overgrown forsythia on hands and knees, cutting out perimeter canes lying on the ground, and thus forcing it to flow upward like a fountain. Cut out old, dead stubbed-off canes at the base. You'll know they are dead because they don't have any side branches growing off of them. Mostly they are so old as to be punky and you can just yank them out with your hand. Sometimes I just step on an old dead stub and lean into it. It just snaps out. (In trees the removal of dead limbs is sometimes referred to as Oregon Boot Pruning.) Continue pruning by working your way up and out, moving in a roughly spiral fashion. Take out dead wood, and crossing/rubbing branches. Take out a few canes that crowd up the center, sometimes sawing with just the tip of your blade. Spend a lot of time moving around getting into position for the best cut. Crawl outside the shrub and walk around it every so often to judge your progress and plan your next avenue of attack. Why? One, you may see how much things are improving already and be encouraged to continue, or Two, you may see that things are getting very thin on one side and decide to move to the other before you over-thin the entire shrub. Remember, you never can get it to look perfect from all sides, so **quit while you're ahead**. In point of fact, almost all branches in a forsythia are rubbing and crossing. This generally discourages the new pruner. Often he or she just gives up, cuts off the top and goes back inside the house to fix a nice hot cup of cocoa. But remember the job is not to *eliminate* wrong branches, just *reduce the number* of them. It doesn't even really matter which ones you choose. You could blindfold yourself, throw six darts into the forsythia bush, cut out the darted ones, and it would miraculously look a lot better. So don't worry about which cane is the right one, just make yourself cut, and keep moving around. There is nothing that you can do to a mature forsythia (heading or over thinning) that you can't get back. So be brave. As an old client of mine says, "Prune with vigor." Forsythias are really, really tough, and can always renew themselves with new canes.

CASS' PRUNING TECHNIQUE:

I have no trouble accepting the size of plants. When customers say they want it made *smaller*, I hear that they want it made *better looking*. I lift up the bottom, removing those branches lying on the ground. I thin out crossing rubbing branches by cutting to a lateral or to the ground. I look for stubs, stubs, stubs, and crowded branch ends where the poor shrub has been previously headed. I use the thinning cut to "simplify" these crowded, mal-pruned areas. I don't really spend a lot of time cutting canes to the ground. I'm just as likely to limb it up a bit to make it look more perky, and cut off the worst rambling canes that head into nearby shrubs, touch the house, or look like they might poke someone in the eye. I spend a lot of time creating definition (or empty spaces between plants), so that they seem to fit together better. I very much recall working on the yard of a certain, great, old gal. She insisted I make the forsythia smaller. It was a fright of regrowth from the previous "cutting-back" job. I tried to avoid the task, doing other needed work in the garden. But she pointed me back at it. So I screwed up

my courage, went in, and mucked about, not trying to make it smaller, just better. Later she said, "Now, see how much better it looks?"



STOOLING, COPPICING OR RADICAL RENOVATION:

An entire system of managing forsythias and other deciduous flowering shrubs is found in several pruning guides and in old British garden books. There it is recommended that the entire plant be cut down or to a low framework called a "stool". This is to be done every year after the shrubs are through blooming. This allows these tough plants time to regrow, set buds and bloom for the next year. I figure it worked well in olden days because labor was cheap, and it was too difficult to explain real selective pruning. I don't think it's such a good idea in very hot climates, or when done before the plant is thoroughly established (three years?). I call cutting a plant to the ground *radical renovation*, and I usually do it as a short cut (ha, ha) to rehabilitative pruning for a previously mal-pruned plant *not* as a yearly maintenance chore. The other way to renovate a mal-pruned plant is to cut one-third of the canes to the ground for three years in a row, at which point new growth will have completely replaced the old. I recall a lady who had all of her deciduous flowering shrubs boxed for years. Now they were too big again and she couldn't figure out what to do. They were far too dense for the one-third method. Instead, I renovated every other one to a low (less than two feet), uneven framework of stubbed-off canes. This was done to encourage regrowth at uneven heights which is more natural looking. The next Spring the forsythia was up and blooming and almost as tall as it was before. However the canes were very stiff and straight and less than 1/4 inch in diameter. But, over the following years, the canes fattened up, arched over, put on side branches and more blooms, thus regaining the characteristic vase or fountain shape. Then I cut down the other half of the

shrubs and repeated the procedure. I could have cut them all down at once, but this is usually too great a leap of faith for the average homeowner.

TIMING:

When people ask *how* to prune a forsythia, they are usually treated to a lecture on *when* to prune them. The pruner is admonished to prune only when the plant is through blooming. This really is only necessary if the stooling (also called coppicing) method is used and it's just common sense. If you cut the entire shrub to the ground just before bloom time, it doesn't bloom. But, if you wait until it's through blooming, it has all spring and summer to regrow, set up buds and bloom the next spring. When I renovate a shrub, (which occurs only once every fifteen years in the life of a shrub), I often do so *before* bloom time. So the homeowner misses their flowers for a year, big deal. Heck, they're already in shock because I cut the whole thing to the ground! I prune early because it gives me a larger window of opportunity and it gives the shrub a few more weeks of warm (warm to a shrub) growing weather in which to recuperate from surgery.

But for general thinning and pruning done as regular maintenance, anytime is good in my opinion. The old adage is "Prune when the shears are sharp." Winter is a nice time to prune because all the leaves are off and you can see what's going on in there. Spring or Summer is a nice time to prune because it's nicer weather for the gardener. Thinning out just before bloom time allows you to force some branches inside in a vase of water. The only times I resist pruning are during a hard freeze or a drought. Pruning is just one more stress for the plant. The great thing about selective pruning is that it doesn't really matter when you do it, there will still be plenty of flowers left on the remaining canes.

PRONUNCIATION:

I had an interesting conversation with a British arborist over a mug of Guinness. He said he was tired of getting the "you poor, ignorant laborer" look every time he pronounced forsythia, fors-eye-th-ia. He insisted that this was the correct pronunciation as the plant was named after a man called Forsythe from his country, as in "the Forsythe Saga". He's probably right, but I doubt that gardeners around here will take up that pronunciation anytime soon. After all, it took us so long to master Latin as we know it. Consider the fact that the correct pronunciation for Pinus (the genus of pine trees) is PEE-nus. Our reputations would be shot.

Anyway, good luck with your forsythia and remember, Prune With Vigor!