

Ornamental Cherries, Crabapples and Purple Leaf Plum

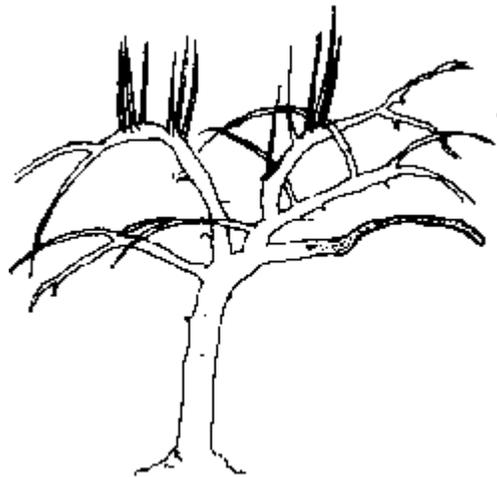
by Cass Turnbull

This Spring I got a call from a lady who said, " I pruned my flowering plum tree according to the instructions in my pruning book. I took out all the crossing branches, the ones headed into the middle and the suckers. There's nothing left, I think I may have killed it!" Although she may have, the more likely scenario is that it will explode into water sprout regrowth over the course of the next year.

Plums, crabs, and cherries suffer from a great deal of mal-pruning because they have fairly confusing, and to some, upsetting branch systems. They are also, usually, at a height that most pruners can get to, (although height doesn't seem to stop people when they get a hankering to top their birches—the single most abused tree in the Seattle area). The branch patterns on crabs, plums and cherries naturally cross back and forth. Andrea, my mentor, described it as "dancing branches". I think they look more like someone took the lid off a box of bunnies.

DON'T

Watch out! The main reason these trees are difficult to prune is that they are extremely prone to water sprout regrowth. Water sprouts are the straight, skinny, rapidly growing shoots that are the result of mal-pruning and other forms of stress. These trees just seem to have itchy buds. Walk past them with a pair of Felcos and they're likely to throw enough sprouts to turn your hair white ("Oh, is that what happened?", I can hear someone say).



Resist size reduction pruning:
Watersprout regrowth from "proper" crown
reduction. Dieback from heading back "a little."

The other problem with plums and cherries (not crabs) is that they are horrible compartmentalizers. (Can I get a "prunus with an absence of malus" joke in here somehow?) That is to say, they die-back readily if branches are shortened (headed). When the jerk who owns the apartment building down by the Jack in the

Box in my neighborhood topped five full sized PLPs (Purple leaf plums), two died stone-cold dead within the first two years. The rest grew back to exactly the same size (except now their winter branch pattern is ruined and they all have suckers growing from the graft union). I have even seen young Prunus (cherries and plums) die from numerous, small heading cuts (under 2"). The fact that these species are so sensitive makes me resist even the slightest bit of size reduction.

I remember buying my Fuji cherry many years ago. At first I longed for the branches to be lower and more horizontal. To my delight, I found that, over time, the limbs folded down and out. A few years later, I realized they don't stop growing. The lower limbs kept lowering. Eventually one headed into the parking space. The one on the other side lowered into foot traffic. I headed one back, selectively, cutting back to a largish side limb. The other one I cut off completely. This year the tree is near dead, mostly because of a virus (no inside leaves) and the brown rot (killing branches from the tip back). But I'm certain that the pruning hurt it as well.

It is not uncommon for homeowners with very old, broad-limbed cherry trees to ask to have them pruned back "just a little" to stop them from getting too wide. I never oblige. It's just too hard on a cherry tree, in my opinion, which is old at age forty.

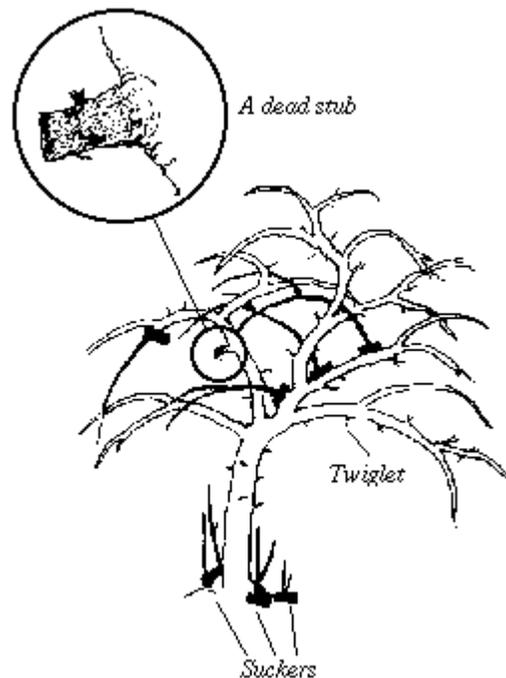
I was most unnerved when some grossly topped cherries (3 foot diameter trunks, 1 foot topping cuts) which I pass on my way to the Center for Urban Horticulture, survived, resprouted and seem to be doing fine. I wish that plants acted more predictably to bad pruning, and within the first month. Would that trees had vocal cords, too. Unfortunately, the death and die-back from topping, heading, and repeat stripping is bad for trees in a statistical sort of way. Smoking cigarettes only kills some people (not all), and then only after a long period of time. The ill effects of bad pruning often take years to show up. By then no one connects the cause with the effect.

THE OTHER COMMON PRUNING MISTAKE on cherries, crabs, and plums is to strip out the centers. New gardeners frequently over prune in this way. A little is good, a lot is better. But like cutting hair, it is important to know when to quit. Over thinning is a little harder to forgive when done by experienced professionals. But it is extremely common. In particular, we had one such well-loved arborist here in Seattle. He was the darling, in fact, of some of the wealthier garden clubs. He routinely stripped out these trees to "accentuate" the branch pattern. We called him ART the tree shaper. Of course the trees bloomed pathetically and the tree owners were locked into the expensive re-removal of water sprouts every year, forever. He died a few years ago but I still run across many examples of his work, living monuments to his ego and his misguided love of trees.

An entire subset of well-educated arborists in the San Francisco area have subscribed to this sort of over thinning, (They refer to it as artistic pruning, but one arborist who came by the booth called it "autistic pruning.") The PlantAmnesty chapter members down there will have a hard time discerning those that prune well from those who prune too well, by talking to them or to their devoted customers. However, I can offer the following advice: With few exceptions, a properly pruned tree will not regrow into a forest of water sprouts the following Spring. (The exceptions include Elms, which tend to sucker or water sprout no matter how lightly you prune them, and espaliered fruit trees.) Unfortunately, many of these erudite arborists have also developed exquisite long, drawn-out tortures for conifers such

as Monterey Cypress. By in large, conifers cannot re-sprout. Instead, they will simply die one summer during a drought. And the home owners never know that they paid a lot of money to do it to themselves.

IN SUMMARY, don't top these trees. Don't tip them or shape them into balls, boxes or hamburgers. Don't clip your crabapple into a cute umbrella every year. Don't try to make the fastigate (skinny) cherry tree into a horizontal tree, or cut it back into a diaper shape, (see the Chevron station in the U-district). Avoid shortening (heading-back) major limbs and over thinning. As a general rule of thumb, restrict yourself to pruning less than one sixth of the living canopy in a year. If water sprouts return at the places you cut, you either over-pruned or have sliced into the branch collar. Do not re-strip trees which have been mal-pruned in the past. I don't care what your old pruning book says.



Correct pruning:
Choose to remove branches which will
give you the greatest aesthetic improvement.

HOW TO PRUNE.

Ninety percent of your cuts should be dead branch, dead stub and dead twig removal. Summer pruning will make it easier to spot the billions of tiny dead twigs in your cherry tree. I hope you have strong knees, and a good aluminum three-point orchard ladder, because such a chore can take up to three hours on a large, old, neglected flowering cherry. It is well worth the effort. When I teach grounds' crews how to prune, we eventually get to the field demonstration. When we come back inside, a novice is apt to say, "I didn't realize what a big difference taking out the deadwood would make." And next year the job will take only a fraction of the time. For you new pruners, remember to do the dead wood first, and to spend almost as much time placing and setting your ladder as pruning.

Now let's move on to pruning live wood. It helps to think of plants as having a

pruning budget which you can spend any way you like. (Deadwood doesn't count. You can and should take all the deadwood out.) On crabs, cherries and ornamental plums, the live wood budget is small (because of problems of compartmentalization and water sprout regrowth). For example, you can have three big cuts and ten small cuts, or twenty small cuts, or five large cuts or any combination thereof, but remember you will NOT be allowed to remove ALL the crossing-rubbing, wrong way branches. So consider carefully before you cut. Choose to remove branches which will give you the greatest aesthetic improvement. Look for the worst, first.

Look for branches that actually touch each other (crossing/rubbing) but which have not grafted to each other (as sometimes happens). If they are not too big (over two inches in diameter), maybe you can cut one out and leave the better placed one. Usually you choose to leave the branch which heads out from the center, but not always. Especially on these trees, it is their natural habit to backtrack. I like the description of thinning-out trees that says, "Every space is filled, but with fewer branches." Try to restrict your cuts to true thinning cuts, taking a small lateral off a parent stem, rather than selective heading cuts which reduce a limb by cutting back to a lateral (see Pruning Tips-Basic Cuts from the PlantAmnesty literature order form).

You get more aesthetic bang per buck by removing branches which crowd the branch unions (previously called branch crotches, before the politically correct people got to horticulture). But be careful, it looks so good to take out some of the laterals, that you're often compelled to follow the branch out, leading to over thinning. It is also a compulsion to want to cut off all the small twiglets commonly found on cherry tree trunks and branches, and give them that clean look. But remember these twiglets bloom in the spring and are quite pleasing. Leave as many as you can bear.

New pruning students are admonished not to stay too long in any one place, lest they over prune. Keep moving, keep moving. I like to prune from the bottom up, and the inside out, moving in a roughly spiral form. When I consider an area of crowded branches I first try out several possible cuts in my mind's eye. If I am at all in doubt, I leave it and move on to something I am confident should be removed. This is a good way to aid in not over thinning.

Crabapples and plum trees are the same. Especially resist the temptation to remove branches at the upper crowns of the crabapples in order to smooth out the profile. It invariably causes an upsurge of water sprouts which REALLY ruins its looks. You'll never get rid of them by re-pruning, and the tree will, in fact, become more labor intensive and unmanageable over the years.

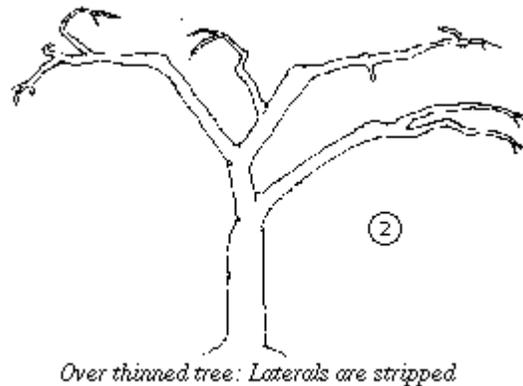
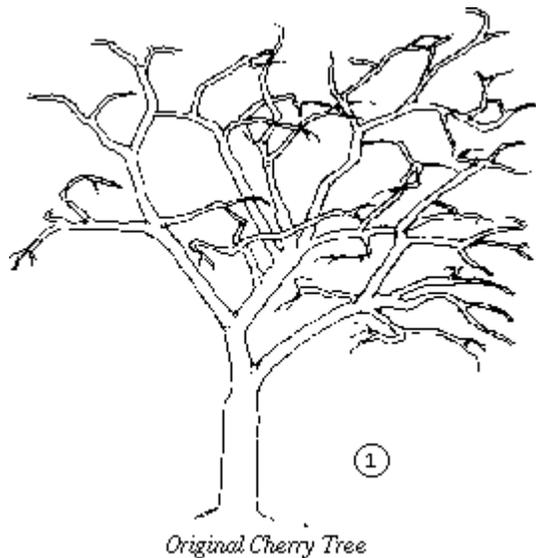
The best looking Purple leaf plum trees I've seen are ones that are very old and have never been pruned. Go in, take out "the dead" and leave the rest. Young plums have a lot of "sucker" growth inside the crown. This is normal, and if you insist on removing it, you will get to do more of it every year till you die. The other alternative is to leave those long skinny shoots, and let them age, curve gently and become graceful branches after ten years. Non-intervention is often the best strategy.

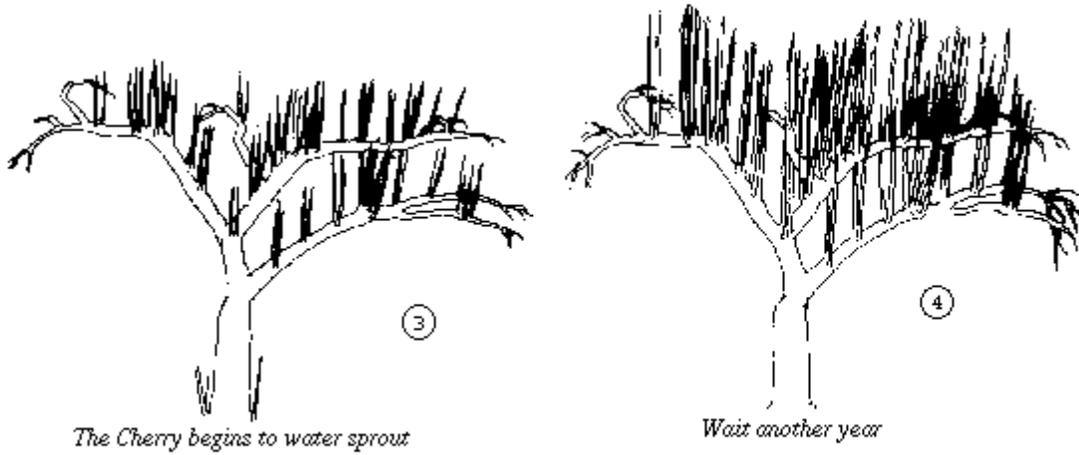
Do, however, remove any and all true suckers which originate on the trunk, graft union (looks like a bulge), or roots. These will ruin the looks of your tree if allowed

to remain. If they originate below the graft union, these shoots will grow up into large trees overtaking the originally selected plant. Due to mower abuse, my local pizzeria now has three large, green-leafed, white blossomed plum trees and the original small, purple-leafed, pink flowering one.

REHABILITATIVE PRUNING.

I watch trees and landscapes over years and I am constantly amazed at how well most of them recover, given half a chance. About four years ago, at a condo on Aurora Avenue, Stubco Landscapers stripped out four Purple leaf plum trees as part of their grounds maintenance program. That Spring, the trees shot back up with a ton of water sprouts, thick as the hair on a dog's back. Over the next two years they turned back into branches about as thick around as my wrist. Once they reached the height of the previous tree, they began to arch out and put on side branches. I couldn't believe my eyes. Most of the lesser water sprouts remained puny or died off. After a tree has been tipped, topped, or stripped, the next course of action is to WAIT. Getting "on top" of it early will simply put your tree back into a spasm of regrowth. In fact, it is probably best to wait three or four years to do any crown restoration. The exception is the removal of dead wood (stubs, twigs, and branches) as it occurs. After the tree has reached its original height you may, slowly, gently and over the course of a few years, thin out the crowded areas where several branches originate from the same point. Back at the condo complex, the trees re-established without any help, just in time for the next crew to sweep through and tip them all back (arghhhh!).





For a tree that has been clipped into a perfect globe, one thins out the lower portions trying to make the tree more uniformly branched (see repairing mal-pruned abelias—last issue). Grounds crews who have inherited globed or umbrella'd trees may simply have to scowl and bear it as they re-shear until they die (the tree or the gardener, whichever comes first). Few clients can endure the middle phase (waiting) in crown restoration. It reminds me of growing out a “perm” or a bad dye job. But do reiterate to your customers that it is not good pruning, and nudge them toward replacement. It is often good to remind them of the expensive nature of mal-pruning. Like so much that is wrong in life, mal-pruning is an object lesson in the law of diminishing returns.