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PlantAmnesty

**PlantAmnesty**  
is a non-profit organization  
dedicated to promoting  
better pruning and gardening.  
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TOPICS INCLUDE:

*Tree Care Information*

*How To Plant A Tree*

*Repairing Mal-Pruned Trees or Shrubs*

*Other Pruning*

Write to:

**PlantAmnesty ▲▲▲**

P.O. Box 15377  
Seattle, Washington 98115-0377

Or Call:

206 / 783-9813

www.plantamnesty.org

# PlantAmnesty's Guide to Pruning

*Bay Area List*  
*Sunset-Western Climate*  
*Zones 15, 16, 17*  
*USDA Zone 10-A*

**PlantAmnesty ▲▲▲**

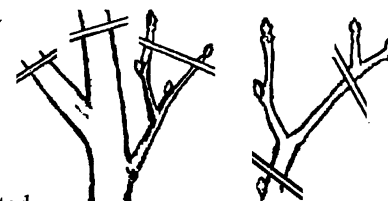
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**Don't:** *Ornamental* trees should never, ever be topped. And shrubs should rarely be sheared (except real topiary and formal hedges). Stripping all of the side branches off of a mature pine or any other tree or shrub is also a no-no. Stripping is not to be confused with selective thinning, which can also make shrubs and trees look open and Oriental.

**Do:** Prune to enhance a plant's natural beauty; to make it feel less oppressive, tidier, cleaner; and to reduce size somewhat, depending on the type of plant. Selective pruning will reduce the bulk of the plant and taking off a few lower limbs of a tree is okay.

**How:** The two types of pruning cuts are *thinning* and *heading*. A **heading cut** is basically cutting off the tip or end of a branch, twig or stem. Heading creates bushiness. The next spring growth is stimulated at the tips of cut branches. Shearing, topping and pinching hedges and chrysanthemums. Not good for most shrubs and trees.



**HEADING CUTS**  
*Cutting back of the tip*

A **thinning cut** removes the branch back to another branch or twig, or to the ground. Most pruning consists of thinning cuts. It forces new growth in existing branches and spreads new growth more evenly throughout the plant. Thinning cuts will let light into the interior, allowing for green branches to cut to if you choose to reduce the size of your shrub. It stays "done" longer and looks natural.



**THINNING CUTS**  
*Cut to a branch, twig or bud*

## PRUNING BY HABIT

Prune to enhance the plant's natural shape or "habit". Plants have one of three basic habits.

### I. CANE GROWERS

Plants that renew themselves by sending up new branches called canes from the base. Forsythias, roses, bamboo, kerria, weigela – very tough plants – you can hardly hurt them.

Stare at your shrub.

Take out all **dead wood**. Always do this first.

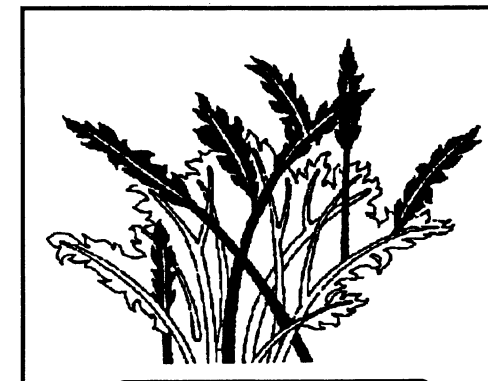
Take out some (1/3 to 1/8) of the biggest and oldest, as well as a few of the puniest canes, to the base. Do this every year to keep the size controlled.

Pick out a few of the worst canes that **rub or cross** each other, that look sick or go the **wrong way** (that is, start at the outside, head back through the center and out the other side), and **ugly branches** (usually too straight).

Generally prune to **open up the center**.

**Tidy up** the top with thinning cuts. Cut back anything hanging on the ground and cut to a side branch or bud.

Prune with vigor!



**CANE GROWERS**  
*Take out canes at base*

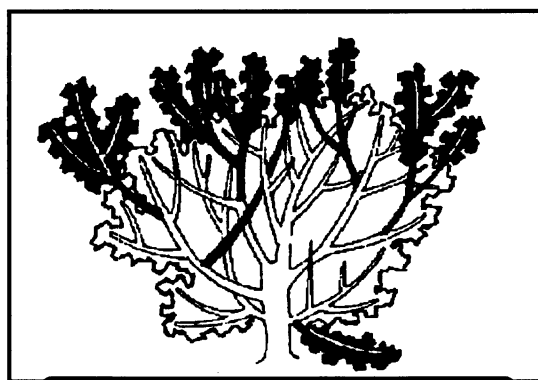
## II. MOUNDS

Look like mounds and are medium-tough plants, found in mass plantings. They have small leaves and supple branches. You usually just want to tidy them up or reduce their size. People like to shear these – don't you! Examples of mounds are abelias, escallonia, barberries and Mexican orange. These are easiest to make and keep small.

Locate the longest, most unruly branch. Grab the tip with your left hand. Follow the branch **down into the interior** of the plant with your right-hand pruners, and snip it off two inches to one foot below the general surface level of your shrub. Cut to a side branch or bud if possible. (Grab & Snip Method)

Don't look for the next *closest* branch that's too long, but the **next worst too long**, too unruly branch in the area and cut it back. Do this all over your shrub until it looks miraculously tidy and shorter, but natural.

These shrubs often benefit from taking out some of the old canes to their base. This opens up and renews the shrub. Any dead wood or weeds should also be removed.



**MOUNDS**

*Cut unruly branches off inside plant*

## III. TREE-LIKES

Best let to get big. Not to be pruned heavily-handedly. Good selective pruning can open them up and make them look less oppressive, can train branches around gutters and off of houses, and can bring more beauty out of your plant. These shrubs are the hardest to do. Never remove more than 1/8 total leaf surface in one year. It stresses them or it can cause a watersprout-rebound effect — ick! Tree-likes have stiffish branches, generally. Examples of tree-likes include rhododendrons, andromeda (pieris), magnolias, deciduous Viburnums, camellias and witch hazel.

Most tree-likes just need to have all of the **dead wood** taken out.

*If you still want to do more:*

Take out **suckers** (straight-up, skinny branches from the base and trunk of the shrub or tree).

Take out any big **crossing**, **rubbing** branches and **double leaders** (two main top branches with a narrow branch-crotch angle) on trees.

Take back or remove any branches **hanging on the ground**, if only up 1/2".

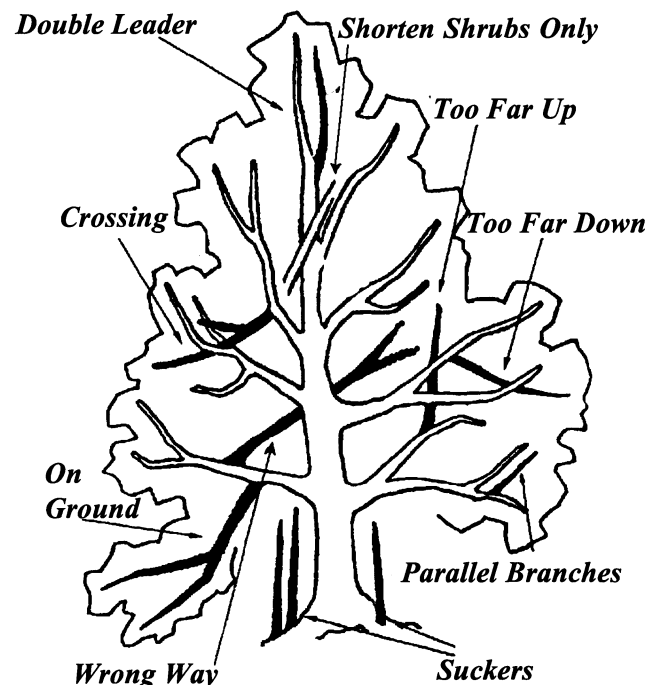
Take out the worst of the smaller crossing, rubbing branches — choosing the healthiest and best placed branch to remain.

Prune to shorten or completely remove the worst **wrong-way** branches that start from the outside of the shrub, and go the wrong way back into the center and out the other side.

Sometimes a side branch has a smaller branch that heads **too far up** into the next "layer", or goes **too far down**. You can cut some of these off to add more definition to your shrub's branches.

If you have two **parallel** branches rather close together, it may look better to remove one. If you have three parallel branches you may want to remove the center one. This will make things look nicer.

Before you finish, stand back and observe. If necessary, you may **sparingly** shorten some branches on tree-like shrubs (not trees). Cut back to a side branch.



## TREES AND TREE-LIKES

### HINTS & TIPS

On many shrubs and trees, especially tree-likes, you want to fix things slowly over three to five years. Do some now, come back next year.

"Wander, ponder, and prune," the old saying goes. Pruners always stare at their shrubs, trying to locate unwanted branches, imagining their shrubs without this or that branch, seeing how it will grow next year — seeing what needs to be done. Much like a haircut, it's easy to take it off, hard to put back on. Know when to quit.

If a plant is really too big, you may want to move it, remove it (go ahead, be ruthless!) or renovate it (not dealt with here). But try real selective pruning first!

## HELPFUL LISTS

### Mounds (Grab & Snip)

Barberries	Escallonia
Abelia	Hollys
Rock Rose	Acuba
Hebes	Myrtle
Boxwood	Japanese Holly
Rosemary	Evergreen Azaleas
Oleander (sometimes trained into tree)	
Pittosporum tobira (Wheeler's Dwarf)	
Evergreen Viburnums	
Gardenia jasminoides	
Grevillea 'Noellii'	
Choisya (Mexican Orange)	
Raphiolepis indica	

### Cane Growers (Cut canes to the ground)

Roses	Hydrangea
Oregon Grape	Bamboo
Nandina (Heavenly Bamboo)	
Lilac (Sometimes)	

### Tree-Likes (Thin-out, many small cuts)

Pine	Fig
Toyon	Camellias
Lilac	Cherry
Tea Trees	Magnolia
Manzanita	Bottle Brushes
Cotoneaster	Strawberry Tree
Pineapple Guava	
Dodonaea viscosa	
Myoporum laetum	
Pacific Wax Myrtle	
Pittosporum eugenioides	
Rhododendrons	
Pieris (Andromeda)	
Tibouchina urvilleana	

### Tough Tree-Likes (Can be headed into hedges or let go natural)

Photinia	Pyracantha
Privet	Laurel