

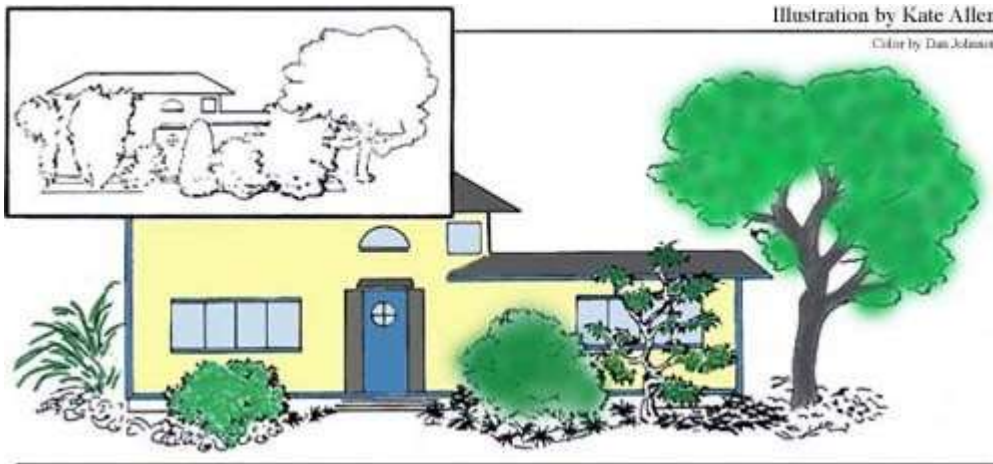


Renovating an Overgrown Foundation Planting

Original article by Cass Turnbull, circa 1991. Revised by PlantAmnesty 2021

Typical overgrown landscape

Left to right: Cane grower (sheared *Forsythia*); conifer (Lawson falsecypress); tree-like (Rhododendron); conifer (Alberta spruce); mound (evergreen azalea); tree-like (*Pieris*); tree (maple)



Solutions (one to two years later) Left to right: Renovated *Forsythia*; replace Lawson falsecypress with *Choisya*; transplant the rhododendron to another area; remove the Alberta spruce; leave the azalea; thin out the *Pieris*; raise the canopy of the maple tree. Don't forget to revise the bed edges and add lower story plants.

When you can no longer see out the front room windows, and Halloween trick-or-treaters avoid your house because they can't get through overhanging shrubberies, it's time to consider renovating the front yard.

After thirty years of life, even a well-planned landscape can become overwhelming. The owner's initial reaction is to cut it all back to size. Unfortunately, heading all the trees and shrubs back usually results in an upsurge of watersprout regrowth, which is not only rapid but unsightly.

The art of renovating a foundation planting requires a thorough understanding of which plants can be pruned to shorten, and those which are better to limb up or thin out.

The Choice of Pruning

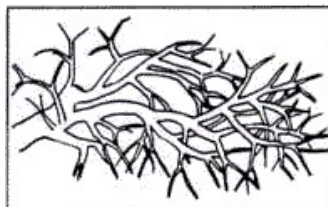
When teaching pruning, we often divide plants into categories according to their malleability. Cane growers, such as nandina, forsythia, and Oregon grape, are easy to reduce in size by annually cutting some of the tallest canes to the ground. Such pruning also "thins" these plants out (reduces density), making them more beautiful and less bulky. Cane-growers will respond well to the heading-back of some canes in order to force new growth farther down inside the plant.

Mounding habit shrubs are relatively easy to reduce in height over time. These shrubs have smaller leaves and more herbaceous or supple limbs. Examples include *Choisya*, *escallonia*, *spirea*, and most barberries. These are good choices for under windows and next to walkways. To reduce a mounding-habit shrub, selectively shorten branches by cutting them back to points of attachment well down inside the plant.

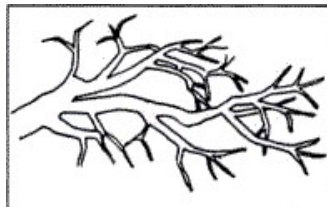
Trees and tree-like shrubs have woodier branches. Each limb divides many times. These garden favorites have articulated branch patterns that are the source of their intrinsic beauty. Unfortunately, many of these plants are the most difficult to reduce in size. More successful pruning enterprises include limbing up (raising the canopy), thinning out (reducing density), or redirecting growth. Even when thinning shrubs, one must know how much can be taken from each species before stimulating undesirable watersprout regrowth. A pine, camellia, or pieris can thin out quite well. A cherry, witch hazel, or double-file viburnum will resent all but the lightest of thinnings. If these are pruned too much, the gardener is punished with an upsurge of watersprout regrowth the following season. The good pruner knows not only how and where to cut, but also when to quit.



Always take deadwood out first.



Average thinning involves removal of one-eighth of total leaves



Some tree-like shrubs can be thinned up to one quarter to one third.

Minor to Major Renovation

Cutting an overgrown or mal-pruned plant down to the ground can give it a second life of service. But, like surgery, such "radical renovation" should be done sparingly. (Occasionally the patient dies.) Canegrowers are the most successful candidates for this frightening looking treatment. Simply cut all the canes almost to the ground in early spring and wait for them to regrow. Mounding-habit shrubs are more often reduced to an uneven framework about a third of the plant's original size.

Radical renovations should only be done in early spring, after all danger of freeze is past. Remember that the root system of a full-size plant remains. It will rapidly regrow into a large shrub in a year or two. Allow plenty of room for it to reestablish a natural shape. If there is insufficient room for a mature plant to exist in its present site, consider removing it entirely.

Tree-like shrubs, including camellias, many viburnums, and even most rhododendrons, can also be cut to the ground to start over. (Not the so-called "smooth barked" rhododendrons, those with *R. thompsonii* blood in their veins, we are told.) But shrubs with a tree-like habit are less reliable survivors, take longer to reestablish a pleasing form, and occasionally never do regrow satisfactorily. Therefore, radical renovation is at best a last-resort measure or a horticultural experiment for the home gardener who is willing to chance it.

To Transplant or Remove?

Consider transplanting a too-large or crowded shrub. Azaleas and full-sized rhododendrons are the best candidates for relocation. Actually, almost any plant (except perhaps magnolias) can be transplanted successfully given sufficient water and a large enough root ball. The real limits are in the strength of your back or the size of your budget. For each plant, research the best times for transplanting. Remember that a July decision to transplant an azalea should mean that your calendar now has a reminder set between fall and early spring, reminding you to transplant that azalea when it will have the best chance of survival.

At other times it will be wiser to simply do away with some mature plants altogether. Conifers (spruces, junipers, firs, and the like) are difficult to manipulate with pruning. Fortunately, they are easy to kill since most cannot resprout from the stump. Exceptions include pines and thread cypress, which can be modestly thinned, and yews, which will stump sprout.

Role of a "Lower Story"

Finally, adding a new "lower story" is an under-utilized way to make things look well-proportioned again. On a summer tour of Ann Lovejoy's garden, I noted that a quince bush the size of a Volkswagon van had been retained from the original farmhouse planting. Instead of pruning it back to a smaller size, it had been surrounded by an even more enormous planting bed. Rather than appearing too big, the shrub then served as a valuable backbone to a charming perennial border.

Making a Brave Decision

In conclusion, when assessing a foundation planting one should always keep in mind the three main options: prune it, move it, or kill it. Add to that the possibility of enlarging beds and adding masses of lower story plantings. Then try out the various options in your mind's eye.

Ask what will work given the plant's natural habit and still meet the demands of the location. Thin it out? Limb it up? Shorten or radically renovate? And finally, decide which options will give you the best overall picture. After that, you must be brave! Only then can you have the garden of your heart's desire!



Remember! Sawing out a large branch also removes small stuff attached!



Testing, observing ...



Hmmm. Could lighten this up a bit ... No, maybe wait ...