

Don't Shear: Why Johnny Can't Prune

By Cass Turnbull

I wish I were a great persuader. If I were, I would persuade the landscape maintenance establishment to take up the cause of promoting selective pruning, as opposed to shrub shearing, in order to significantly improve both the wages and status of our industry.

But the fates have made me a ranter, rather than a persuader. I've had some significant success ranting in Seattle with the PlantAmnesty crusade against tree topping. Twenty-three years ago, Seattle was a city where tree topping was synonymous with tree pruning, accounting for 80% of the work done on trees. Today, by my estimation, topping accounts for less than 5%. PlantAmnesty, for those who don't know, is a nonprofit organization devoted to promoting better pruning or, as we like to say, "to end the senseless torture and mutilation of trees and shrubs caused by mal-pruning." We have a sense of humor and a mission. From the beginning, we enjoyed the support of the Seattle arborists who know how to prune. For them, supporting PlantAmnesty was a matter of survival in a world widely, if inadvertently, hostile to trees. These arborists gave and continue to give freely of their time, moral support, and funds, as does the International Society of Arboriculture, their professional organization.

Although the anti-topping crusade took off rapidly, the anti-shearing campaign took off and landed with a bit of a thud. PlantAmnesty has received support from the landscape industry, but with a definite lack of enthusiasm for the goal. This has been very disappointing to me personally. The shearing problem has always been bad, and it has increased dramatically during the recession. I have racked my brains to understand the exact nature of the industry's reluctance to address it. **Why?**

To overcome this reluctance, I must: 1) make the case that selectively pruning shrubs is cheaper, faster, and better for the health and good looks of plants than shearing; 2) confront some of the psychological barriers to becoming a company that uses selective pruning; and 3) give reasons to actively promote selective pruning as a means to a business end of better profits and more respect.

So, as my father used to say, "Hear me out."

When Is Shearing Bad and Why?

By unsustainable shearing, I mean the endless balls and boxes seen on most commercial and plenty of private landscapes. On the other hand, pruning art, such as formal hedges, topiary,

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knot gardens, and tamomono shearing in authentic Japanese formal gardens, is appropriate, sustainable shearing. Pruning art breaks the rules of pruning to achieve a special effect. Shearing formal hedges, for example, breaks two pruning rules: remove crossing/rubbing branches and no heading cuts. The purpose of breaking these two rules is to make a row of shrubs into a formal-looking wall. The hedge must be made up of shrubs chosen for their ability to withstand repeated shearing. The resulting maintenance costs, when compared to those of selectively pruned shrubs, are high. This is the case with all pruning art, including pollarding, pleaching, cloud pruning, and espalier. They all require high maintenance, with specific species chosen purposely to create a formal garden or garden element. Just because plants are sheared does not mean they are topiary.

Costly and Time-Consuming

I have a difficult time convincing grounds crews that selective pruning is cheaper than hedge shearing. In fact, I remember when I was first learning selective pruning from my mentor Andrea, a horticulturist hired by the Seattle Parks Department to teach the grounds crew about plants. She asked if I wanted to learn how to prune a deciduous azalea. I said, “Sure.” She took me to a park where she spent five minutes on one tiny plant, tweaking out little dead bits. I thought to myself, “We don’t have time for this, we’ve got work to do!” But later, she thinned out a bank of pines at the entrance to the park. They were magically transformed from a blob of imposing green to a welcoming, airy, and artistic grouping of conifers. “Wow!” I thought, “I want to learn how to do that!”

The problem with shearing most plants is that shearing stimulates watersprout regrowth that is unattractive and needs to be re-sheared frequently to keep the plant looking tidy—sometimes as often as eight times a year. But selectively pruned plants need to be pruned only once every one-to-five years. A key element of such pruning is that the plant doesn’t react with watersprouts, ruining the looks of shrubs and trees and locking them into a high-maintenance regime, which equals high cost. I wonder if creating a problem for which we must then spend a customer’s money to keep fixed is even ethical. By definition, good pruning does not stimulate watersprout production. The three most common forms of mal-pruning—topping, inappropriate shearing, and overthinning—cause watersprouts and should not be employed in the business.

Unhealthy for Plants

Any pruning book will explain that one prunes to open up the center of the plant, allowing air and light penetration to make the plant healthy. Shearing, on the other hand, creates a twiggy outer shell that gets ever denser and collects more deadwood and dead leaves every year, the opposite of a healthy condition. The results create the perfect protected place for pests and diseases, akin to locking up the house so the garbage can’t be removed. After many years, this

treatment can lead to disease and general bad health without actually being a disease itself. If plants have mites and blights, bugs and mildews galore, how they were pruned may be the root of the problem.

Subverts a Shrub's Natural Beauty

Every plant in a landscape has been chosen because it adds something special to the overall design. It may have nice flowers, interesting texture, or artistic branch structure. Whatever the feature may be, it should be accentuated with pruning, not destroyed by shearing. When shearing, one can easily cut off all the flowers and make everything look the same—smooth and round (or square). But a designer's skill is in making a natural but interesting, seasonally changing, and pleasing picture. Great gardens balance theme and contrast. Shearing, however, makes everything look the same.

Landscapers rightfully complain that designers frequently create maintenance nightmares by overplanting and mis-siting plants. Designers, on the other hand, rightfully complain that their perfectly good designs (and they do exist) are destroyed by shear-happy landscapers. For years I have been filming one landscape in particular—the grounds of a local church. Someone had designed a great landscape that needed minimal maintenance and practically no pruning. A hedge-shearing maniac (HSM) took it on, and now, 20 years later, not a single original shrub remains. The HSM pruned them all to death. The replacement design isn't holding up any better and offers little by way of landscape worthiness. I feel for the original designer, where ever and whoever he or she is.

This Is Not News

The facts that there is a desirable skill set called selective pruning and that shrub shearing is considered abhorrent by a certain percentage of the population are not news to most people who have been in the landscape business for any length of time. Why does shearing persist even among the larger, more successful companies? If it is wrong and it costs more, why does it continue to be the industry standard? Why, why, why?

Looks Good in Some Eyes

The first reason is that shearing can actually look good to the untrained eyes of many landscapers and property owners. Tree topping is also wrong and costly, but at least it looks bad. There is almost an instinctive affinity for shearing in the unenlightened. I remember 25 years ago when I still worked for the Seattle Parks Department, I was headed up the hill with my boss when we passed one of those goofy sheared yards. My boss said, "Ugh! Everything is sheared to within an inch of their lives!" I thought, "He sure is a party pooper. They look fine to me. I like them." Thirty years later I'm married to the guy and running a crusade to end sheared

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shrubbery.

Most of us in the industry get into shrub maintenance through the back door. Our primary jobs are mowing, litter pick up, blowing litter off hardscapes, shearing the hedges, and fixing the irrigation. Then one day someone asks for the shrubs to be pruned. And what is done is what the guy next door did. The plants are sheared up and everything looks tidy and under control. Maybe the owner dishes out compliments—surely this is a good thing. The ego boost is immediate, as is the reinforcement. There is so little positive reinforcement or even acknowledgement in our business that, once a compliment has been paid, reversing the course of events is difficult. Generally, our success is measured by the lack of complaints. If we are performing well, everything looks perfect all the time—as if it all grew to the right size and stopped.

But folks who shear landscapes also sometimes find that condo owners are actually complaining about the pruning. Such complainers often turn out to be members of a garden club or landscape committee. They know that shearing is a bad thing and they resent their money being spent to ruin their valuable landscape. We are in such an odd industry that sometimes the homeowners know more about the right way to do things than their landscape professionals. Nonetheless, we tend to dismiss their complaints, because the compliments we got felt so good. And besides, now we're committed to shearing.

Unfortunately, sheared plants only look good for a while. Over time they get large and unwieldy, clogged with leaves, overrun with water spouts, or bug infested. And now we notice that we are spending a lot of time on the shrubbery. Unsustainable shearing ruins plants in slow motion over the course of years until they are so far gone that they can't be fixed.

People often tell me that they shear because the customer requested it. But the request usually comes only after the plants were sheared for the first time. The trick is not to start shearing in the first place. Besides, doing something simply because a customer wants it puts us in some pretty bad company. What, for example, is the difference between a prescribing physician and a drug pusher? One provides drugs that are right for the patient's health; the other provides drugs that the customer wants, in spite of bad health effects.

Locked In

Water sprouts, those straight-up, skinny, rapidly growing shoots that are created by bad pruning (heading cuts) are a big problem. Once a shrub is sheared, it rebounds with watersprouts. Shearing those off will just create more. Cutting the new ones off creates more and more! How does one stop this cycle? Plants that have been sheared can often be retrained into natural-looking shrubs and trees again. But the customer has to buy into rehabilitating previously sheared shrubs. Who wants to admit to the customer that something

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is wrong with the way things are? Besides, rehabilitation can be a tough sell when plants sometimes take years to look good again and often look like heck in the meantime.

Wrong Timing

There is a rhythm to the business of lawn care, based on the speed with which power equipment is used to mow, edge, and blow the property. Then the landscaper must hasten to the next property because speed and precision determine the company's profit margin. Shearing plants fits nicely into this routine, while selective pruning does not. Who wants to wait for some guy to finish pruning the forsythia when the time has come to move on? The solution is to prune selectively in the winter. One can use the widespread concept of pruning timing to convince customers that this work needs doing in the off season.

Training

Almost anybody can shear plants without training, but selective pruning is more complex. Crews require training to understand how this kind of pruning is done. Reading about selective pruning is not enough. One needs to see the before and after to truly understand the enormous difference selective pruning can make on the looks of a plant and to realize what a huge amount of material that can be removed from a garden using this technique. One way to accomplish this is to hire someone on the crew who knows how to prune selectively and who can teach any others who show an interest. Alternatively, a separate pruning crew could be used when customers request pruning services. If a crew is too small for specialization, someone could be hired to come in to teach and then show selective pruning as part of winter training. Anybody who teaches pruning at a conference is likely to be available for hire at onsite training.

The Maintenance Mentality

An arborist of my acquaintance attended a series of landscape architecture classes, in one of which the instructor disparagingly referred to the maintenance mentality of grounds crews. Boy, did that burn my butt, given the level of arrogance in the landscape architecture profession. They must have heard the dull roar from the maintenance industry complaining that their overplanting and mis-siting of landscape material creates landscapes that are doomed to self-destruct. After the designer is long gone, the landscape crews are held responsible for maintaining the un-maintainable. How can landscape architects so easily dismiss this chronic complaint about their profession? I imagine that their subconscious thoughts go something like, "I like my design and my customers like it, so to heck with you and your complaints." Unfortunately, the maintenance mentality really does exist with an unconscious and unspoken mantra goes something like "I like it, and my customers likes it, so to heck with you and your complaints about shearing shrubs."

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I know this from personal experience. One of the reasons I left civil service to start my own maintenance business was because neither the grounds crews nor the bosses of the Parks Department would adopt selective pruning. I'd go on vacation and come back to find the shrubs that I had so carefully un-sheared and pruned selectively had been re-sheared by the crew. They liked it, so to heck with anybody else. The grounds crew actively resisted learning what our new horticulturists had to teach us about weeding, mulching, transplanting, shrub names, and how to prune. Why, why, why?

I tried to transfer to the horticulture department in the Parks Department because I wanted to work with people who actually liked plants, not just power equipment. Finally, though, I left and became a gardener with my own crew and a business based on the things I like to do— weeding, pruning, and renovating overgrown landscapes.

A big part of the problem is that grounds crews don't view themselves as servicing the landscape to make it beautiful for owners or users. Shrubs are just that stuff that gets in the way of the power equipment and traps litter. The maintenance mentality eschews anything that smacks of horticulture as being part of the enemy culture. It ignores anything that comes from them—the ones that plant thorny bushes next to kids play areas, ignore the requirements for efficient mowing, and routinely make design decisions that put crews through hell—designs based on some airy-fairy horticultural nonsense unrelated to the real world of the laborer's experience in the field.

The Path to Glory

Landscape crews should embrace their inner horticulturist, by hiring a ringer to teach plant names and pruning. Why? To find the path to glory—or at least the path to the two things the landscape field needs and wants: better wages and more respect.

Knowing What to Do

Landscapers take pride in what they do, not in what they know. They charge for working efficiently with power equipment in bad weather to get the job done. Although crews do not advise homeowners on the best solutions to their garden or landscape problems, they should. Instead of viewing themselves as labor, landscapers could become professionals. Labor does what it is told; professionals know what to do. Instead, we take orders from property owners who feel their duty is to give us instruction. Can you imagine telling your doctor that, because of a stomach ache, he should remove your gall bladder? No, the customer describes the problem. The professional recommends and provides suitable solutions. The same should be true in our profession. First, we must learn how to talk to our customers and provide design solutions to problems (pruning, transplanting, removing plants, and enlarging beds) rather than

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just complaining about the given design. I give my new customers about a year to come around and become addicted to my services. Every time they come home after a visit from me, something has changed for the better. At first, I take the time explain the game plan, but the eventual goal is to win total trust so that they say, “Whatever you think should be done, Cass.” All crews should know how to improve landscapes and have someone on board willing to talk to the customer about it.

Speak Latin

Every crew member should know the common and botanical names of the most common 200 landscape plants. Yes, they should. Would you trust your car to a mechanic who didn't know the names of the makes and models of the cars they were working on? The hired horticulturalist could teach the crews, who would learn if it meant a bump in pay grade the same way having a pesticide license does. There is nothing like a little Latin to buck up the respect level. I remember having worked for lady for a while, but she still seemed to think of me as labor in need of instruction. One day, to my annoyance, she explained that her landscape architect had told her that such and such was a rare conifer. I corrected her saying, “No, it is a very large rather common plant called *Chamycyparis pisifera filifera aurea*.” Finally, she understood that I knew things and began to defer to me—a landscaper's dream come true. And another thing—I am tired of people always trying to upgrade me to a designer. I am a maintenance professional and what I do takes a lot of skill and knowledge. I long to see our profession obtain this kind of recognition.

Earn More Money

For one thing, we could charge more money. If shrubbery is just that green stuff, and how it's pruned doesn't matter, what is the difference between a professional landscaper and the amateurs that have flocked to the industry since the recession? They are cheaper, often because their businesses aren't legal, and their overhead is low because of their small size. But the reason a storeowner, homeowner, or property management company might hire a landscape professional over low-bid Stub-Co is because the professional landscaper knows how to prune the Japanese maple and won't ruin the landscape with hedge trimmers.

There is a race to the bottom in the landscape industry that was largely avoided in the tree-care industry. They may have less work, but they have not been forced to bid against lower-priced tree toppers. That's because during the last 20 years the industry has successfully educated the consumer not to request topping. The landscape maintenance industry lost an opportunity during the golden age of gardening (that, like everything else, crashed about three years ago) to be seen as knowledgeable professionals to an interested public. But perhaps all is not lost and we can still do this thing. Why? To get better customers who are interested in quality work not just cost. Why? To get paid more for what we know, not just what we do as routine. Why? To

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be seen as professionals and not just businesses. I certainly want all these things.

Sell It

But the revolution in the landscape maintenance industry won't begin until the leaders in the field adopt selective pruning as a cause célèbre. These leaders can be identified by reading the inside flap of various turf man magazines and the newsletters put out by our professional organizations. Even if business owners buy into the need for training crews in the selective pruning technique and weaning them off shearing dependence, landscape business practices will continue to be dragged down by low-bid shearing companies until we take the final step to sell selective pruning to the customer.

My job is to create the demand for better pruning by ranting to the public. For this purpose, PlantAmnesty enlists the help of media horticulturists who write articles. We have a pruning book, DVDs, classes, workshops, and PowerPoint presentations available on CDs. But none of it will help unless people can identify those companies that provide selective pruning and won't mistakenly ruin the dogwood tree. Yes, landscape companies need to sell it in their promotional material, while giving bids, in articles, and in all words and deeds. Given that many companies will have to continue shearing previously sheared shrubs until they can be phased out, we will need to make good pruning a new thing. Selective pruning could be sold to new customers as an alternative to traditional shearing, saying that it costs less, is better for plant health, uses no carbon emissions (gasoline), and requires no noisy equipment. Selective pruning can be called natural target pruning, fine pruning, or aesthetic pruning. Brag on the company's horticulturally knowledgeable staff and their ability to use the natural pruning technique. These are things that many customers are already seeking.

So, I hope I've persuaded as much as I've ranted. If the horticulturists, the landscape maintenance industry, the media horticulturalists, and the designers all sell it, selective pruning just might become the norm. And, I promise, it will also work to our advantage making a better place for all concerned—the landscapers, their customers, and the plants themselves.