
Cotswold Cottage Gardening

The Kindest Cut

On a crisp clear winter's day, one of the nicest jobs in the garden is to prune shrubs and small trees. There are many reasons for pruning shrubs: to inhibit disease, rejuvenate an ageing plant and to encourage the formation of the most decorative growth, be it flowers, foliage or fruit. But two other major benefits are often overlooked: to keep the plant to the best size for your garden, and to encourage it to form the most suitable and pleasing shape.

If a plant is happy, it will grow, and grow, sometimes rather more than the happy gardener had bargained for. Winter, when the concealing leaves are out of the way, is the ideal time to assess your woody plants, and make the most of them for the coming season.

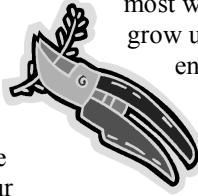
Armed and Ready

Arm yourself with a pair of SHARP secateurs; blunt ones leave ghastly jagged wounds, ugly to look at and an invitation to pests and diseases. (You can get a simple sharpener at any Garden Centre). I much prefer secateurs with a pair of curved blades to the 'anvil' type, where the sharp blade meets a platform; these tend to crush rather than cut stems. First of all, remove any branches which stick out into a path, and may poke you in the eye, ear or other region. Then remove any branches which are obviously dead (if you aren't sure, cut a short section and check for signs of green or sappy wood inside). If in doubt, take it right out – if it isn't dead it soon will be. Then, take out any branches which cross each other, especially if they touch;

rubbing causes wounds which let in disease.

Pruning to Shape

Away with those all those little twiggy growths, they have probably made their flowering contribution, and will just hinder next year's. Start to prune the shrub into an attractive shape, one which doesn't sprawl over lesser, less aggressive plants. It is a sad fact that most woody plants are programmed to grow upwards, and the only way to encourage that nice domed shape which best suits most borders is to cut off or down the branches which are reaching for the sky. Trim these, and sideways extension branches, just in front of an outwards facing bud 9 - 12 inches behind where you would like them to finish up next summer. Usually the shrub will bush out behind the cut, instead of just continuing to grow in a straight line.



Attila the Hun?

This can all seem rather radical; sometimes I feel like Attila the Hun, with a swathe of discarded branches at my feet instead of severed heads. It is especially difficult when the shrub in question is one that you planted yourself, from a small and incredibly expensive pot; or grew from a cutting (aka twig) and have watched its progress like a proud parent. But healthy plants will put their energies into replacing what they have lost with renewed vigour, and you will have shapely, healthy bushes, and paths which you can walk down without competition.

Elaine Hunt