



Getting Dirty Garden Guide™ 105

The Art and Science of Pruning: Why Shearing is a Poor Choice and Characteristic Pruning is Essential

The Misguided Habit of Shearing

Picture a row of neatly trimmed shrubs, sheared into geometric shapes with crisp edges. While this approach may seem tidy and uniform at first glance, it's actually a harsh and damaging way to prune. Shearing is often done with hedge trimmers or electric shears, cutting indiscriminately across the surface of a plant to create a dense, uniform mass. While this technique is commonly used for formal hedges, it's not suitable for the vast majority of shrubs and trees.

The primary issue with shearing is that it promotes dense, artificial growth on the plant's exterior while leaving the interior bare and weakened. Plants rely on light penetration to maintain healthy foliage and a balanced structure. When repeatedly sheared, the outermost layer becomes thick with stubbly, weak shoots that block sunlight from reaching the lower or inner branches. This results in a plant that appears lush on the outside but is actually struggling beneath the surface.

Additionally, shearing does not respect the natural form of the plant. Most shrubs and trees have an inherent growth pattern designed by nature, and when they are forced into rigid shapes, they lose their unique characteristics. Over time, sheared plants often become stressed, more susceptible to disease, and develop a dead, hollow interior that leads to rapid decline.

The Benefits of Characteristic Pruning

In contrast, characteristic pruning respects a plant's natural growth habit while enhancing its health, beauty, and longevity. This method involves selectively removing branches in a way that promotes strong structure, encourages natural shape, and allows light and air to reach the interior. Rather than hacking indiscriminately, characteristic pruning follows the plant's unique needs, leading to a more aesthetically pleasing and structurally sound result.

1. Encourages Proper Growth and Form

Every plant species has a genetically determined shape—whether it's the graceful arching of a lilac, the layered branching of a dogwood, or the upright form of a holly.

Characteristic pruning works with this natural architecture, reinforcing the plant's inherent strengths. By selectively removing unwanted or crossing branches, the plant maintains its intended shape without excessive stress.

2. Promotes Healthier Plants

By allowing sunlight and air to penetrate into the interior, characteristic pruning reduces the risk of fungal diseases that thrive in dense, shaded environments. Good air circulation prevents moisture buildup, while strategic cuts encourage new growth in a balanced,

sustainable way. Unlike shearing, which leaves behind countless open wounds that are vulnerable to disease, proper pruning makes clean cuts that heal efficiently.

3. Enhances Flowering and Fruiting

Many flowering shrubs and trees set their blooms on specific types of wood—some on new growth, others on old wood. Shearing can indiscriminately remove flower buds, diminishing seasonal displays. In contrast, characteristic pruning ensures that the right branches remain intact, leading to abundant blossoms and improved fruit production. For example, lilacs and forsythias bloom on old wood, so they require careful thinning rather than heavy-handed shearing that could strip away next year's flowers.

4. Prevents Weak and Dangerous Growth

Unchecked shearing forces plants to push out soft, weak growth that is easily damaged by wind, snow, or pests. Over time, this leads to an unsustainable cycle of excessive regrowth and decline. By contrast, characteristic pruning strengthens the plant's framework, removing weak branches and fostering a well-balanced structure that can withstand environmental stresses.

5. Reduces Maintenance Over Time

A sheared plant demands constant upkeep to maintain its artificial shape, creating an endless cycle of cutting and regrowth. Conversely, characteristic pruning, when done correctly, reduces the need for frequent intervention. A properly pruned plant grows in a controlled yet natural way, requiring less maintenance and providing long-term beauty.

Conclusion

Shearing may offer a short-term illusion of control, but in the long run, it weakens plants, diminishes their natural beauty, and increases the risk of disease and decline. Characteristic pruning, on the other hand, embraces the plant's form, promoting health, longevity, and stunning natural aesthetics. By working with nature rather than against it, gardeners can create thriving landscapes that require less maintenance while providing greater rewards.

For any gardener, landscaper, or homeowner, the choice is clear: put down the shears and pick up the pruning shears. A little knowledge and a careful hand will go a long way in cultivating strong, beautiful plants that enhance the landscape for years to come.