



## **Daring to Prune**

We're still a few weeks away from the vernal equinox, but spring has already started playing peek-a-boo. The remnants of snow cover in shady spots tell me that it's still too early to dig, while last year's flower stems, now serving in their second, vitally important role as winter homes for so many insects, should be left undisturbed until today's fifty-degrees temperature becomes a daily minimum. But, whether I define it as the last chore of winter or the first of early spring, it's time to sharpen the loppers and do some judicious pruning.

Pruning! The word strikes fear into the hearts of gardeners everywhere. No matter how many lectures I attend, or how many YouTube videos I watch, it still takes every ounce of courage I have to get out there and start cutting. I'm convinced my reluctance derives from childhood trauma: with five daughters, my mother had no time to comb out long, tangled hair. Her solution was to take us to the hairdresser for what was quaintly described as "pixie cuts," but which my five-year-old self regarded as little better than scalping. I still cringe at photos from those days, with my ears sticking out and ugly short bangs across my forehead. "It will grow back," Mom reminded us, and it did, but oh! how long the wait!

And so it is with pruning. Those lumpy lopsided specimens will grow back—mostly—with some exceptions mentioned below, and in the meantime, mistakes can often be hidden behind some tall-growing annual or even a few hefty potted plants. But it's so much better to avoid mistakes in the first place.

I'll start with the easiest: Red twig dogwood and flame willow. Both are deciduous shrubs you'd pass without a second look in summer. You have to wait until winter to see the reason they're worth growing: vibrantly colored stems of red, yellow, or orange that glow against snow, or when the low winter sun shines through them. Color is best on new, young stems, so these get cut way down just before spring growth begins. Hard to make mistakes here, and the cut branches look striking in vases.

Next I'll approach my espaliered apples, and the pyracanthus I'm trying to train up the back of the garage. My ambivalence toward these derives from my longstanding affection for the neatly ordered symmetry of medieval monks' gardens set against my more modern preference for natural shapes. Add to that my reluctance to lop off the top third of any newly-purchased, expensive little tree—as instructed in any "how to espalier" manual—and the result is exactly what you'd expect: trees which are more or less two-dimensional, but lack the tidy stepladder effect of olde worlde walled gardens. The problem is that I haven't followed the science. Most plants have an apical bud at the tip, which suppresses lower latent buds. Cut off that apical bud, and the others will sprout,

creating the desired side branches. My failure to cut at the top resulted in haphazard, irregularly spaced branching. Oh well. I do know that fruiting spurs will grow more prolifically from horizontal branches, so as I prune I'll be tying the branches into place.

The dominance of the apical bud is again in evidence when I turn to the evergreens. Years of cutting yew for holiday decorations have produced branches with clusters of short branchlets at the end. A small amount of surface trimming can improve the appearance of a shrub, as it creates extra fullness. Too much, though, and sunlight can't penetrate to the inner branches, which eventually die. Every so often, cut some branches all the way back to the main stem, just to let the light in.

And while yews will respond enthusiastically, most conifers will not. Since most of their new growth comes from the most recent season's buds, located near the ends of each branch, cutting off those buds causes the entire branch to die back, leaving ugly brown stubs—the horticultural equivalent of ears sticking out. The only way to coax the plant back to a healthy appearance is to cut the stub all the way back to the main stem, which may encourage regrowth. No promises, though.

Finally, I approach the climbing roses. Zepherine Drouhin, planted to grow over the more formal front arch, is nearly thornless, while William Baffin, on the rustic vegetable garden arch, is covered with spikes that quickly convince me to head back indoors to find my heavy gauntlet gloves. Both bloom on last year's wood, so are best kept in check by periodically cutting the oldest stems back, right down to the ground. Remove crossing stems and anything that suffered winter damage, and I'm done, with hardly any blood.

And so the trees and I have both survived another winter and another pruning session, with minimal damage to either.