

Specialized Pruning . . . A Cut Above

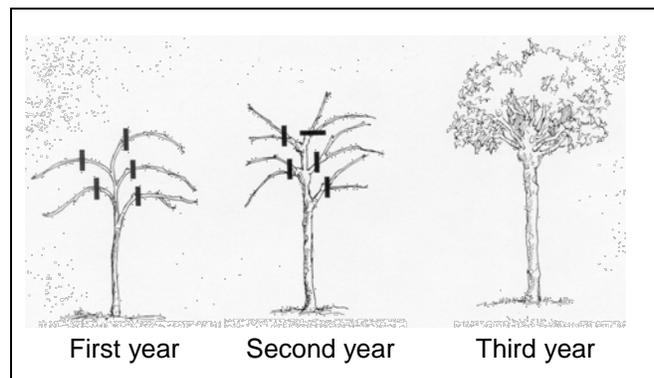
Most people think of pruning strictly as a maintenance chore — if they think of it at all. However, there is much more to pruning than removing a low limb that hits you in the face when you mow or cutting off a dead branch. A tree or shrub can be restyled for aesthetic purposes or to solve a space problem. Several types of ornamental or specialized pruning techniques can help the gardener alter nature.

A fact common to all specialized pruning techniques is that when growth is removed from a tree or shrub by a pruning cut, the plant will respond by making new growth elsewhere. Specialized pruning techniques can solve problems, but they also can add an artistic touch to the home landscape.

Pollarding

Pollarding is the annual removal of all of the previous year's growth, resulting in a flush of slender shoots and branches each spring. Pollarding, a centuries old pruning method, originated as a way to create a renewable source of firewood. Now it is used to maintain large trees at a reduced height.

The tree is headed back every year to approximately the same place, thereby keeping the size of the tree's crown the same year after year. It is particularly useful if a tree is placed in a space too small to accommodate its mature size.



Pollarding should be started when the tree is young. In late winter, when the tree is dormant, cut the tree back to the desired trunk height. Cuts should be made outside the branch collar. Leave some branches on the trunk to help thicken and shade the trunk. After a few years, these side branches may be removed.

The tree's main branch structure will develop into stubby scaffold limbs that should be evenly spaced around the trunk, eventually forming a club-like shape. In the spring, new growth will emerge from this club-like knob or pollard head. Remove old branches each winter, during dormancy, at the pollard head. If this growth is not removed annually, the shoots will eventually push against each other and the tree will develop weak crotch angles.

Pollarding is not topping. Topping is a poor pruning practice performed on mature trees and disregarding the tree's structure. Topping causes weak new growth, destroys natural branch structure and initiates decay inside the tree. A topped tree is more susceptible to cold and storm damage. It is better to remove a tree that has outgrown its space than to top it.

Pollarding is a high-maintenance technique that is an acceptable option for special trees and special locations. A pollarded tree can be maintained at its reduced crown size for its entire lifespan. However, if the annual regimen for pollarding cannot be maintained, another type of pruning should be used.

Coppicing

Coppicing is a method of encouraging regrowth by cutting an older, established shrub or tree almost to the ground. It should be done only on plants with established root systems that are at least three to five years old. The plant must be completely dormant or the shock of such severe pruning could kill it.

New shoot-like stems will emerge from below the cut in the spring, resulting in a multi-stemmed plant. However, like pollarding, coppicing must be done regularly or stems will grow too large and push against each other. This creates weak spots and splitting, allowing moisture to enter and rot the wood.

Coppicing is an effective method for rejuvenating shrubs and a great way to add winter color to your garden. Colorful bark is best seen during the winter months on to 2-year-old branches. Coppicing ensures a steady supply of young, colorful branches.

Unusual foliage effects can also be achieved by coppicing. Directing the plant's energy into growing new shoots results in lush, enlarged leaves with sometimes unique shapes and colors.

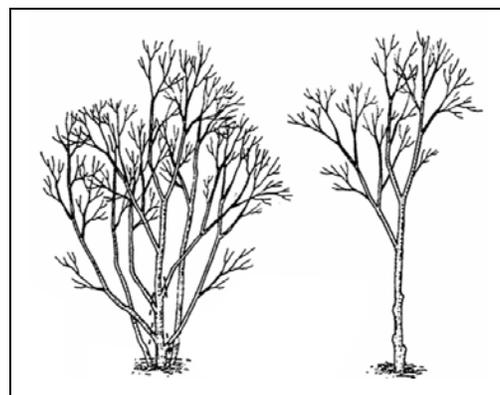
One year regrowth of hazel coppice



Limbing Up

Limbing up is removing the lower branches of a plant. If you're having a hard time finding the perfect small tree, make your own out of a shrub! Many shrubs grow 8 to 15 feet tall and make great single trunk or multi-stemmed trees.

When selecting a shrub, look for one with a coarse branching habit and no suckers. In the spring, select one to three upright, older stems that would make good trunks. Cut off all other stems at ground level.



Next, remove all stems and branches from the lower third of the shrub. Let the shrub recover from this severe pruning. If you're working with a short shrub or a young one from the nursery, you'll need to repeat this step each year until the shrub reaches the desired height.

Once the shrub reaches the height you want, select three to five branches at the top of each trunk to form the main canopy. In order to create an open framework, these branches should be evenly spaced. Remove other branches in the canopy and any that have grown along the trunk. You now have a tree!

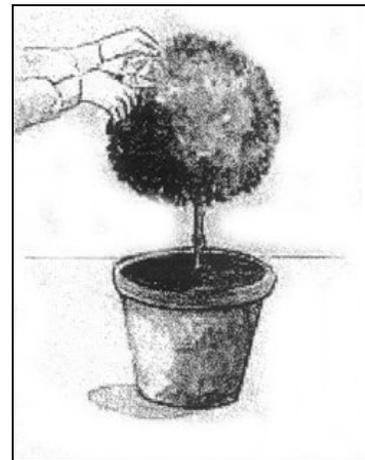
Maintain your new tree by pruning out crossing branches, branches that develop along the trunk and thinning the canopy when needed.

Creating a Standard

A **standard** is a tree or shrub that is trained to grow as a single-stemmed, upright plant with a rounded crown of foliage. Standards may be grown in the garden or in containers.

When choosing a plant to train, select a young plant that doesn't sucker and is coarsely branched. It is also helpful if the plant has at least one strong, straight stem to use as the trunk.

Creating a standard is a slow process. Each spring for the first two years, trim the side stems back by a third. This will help strengthen the trunk and supply food as the plant grows. Let the tip of the shrub, the leader, grow until it is as tall as you want the center of the ball to be, and then pinch it back. You can make your standard whatever height appeals to you, but a good ratio is two-thirds trunk to one-third ball. For example, if you want a 4-foot tall standard with a 16-inch ball, let the leader grow until it is 40 inches tall, then pinch it back.



The next step is to create the trunk.

1. The following spring, remove all the lower branches on the main stem up to what will become the bottom of the ball. Pinch back the remaining tips to encourage the ball to bush out.
2. Allow the plant to grow another year before starting to form the ball.
3. Tie a string to the stem or trunk of the plant at the center of what will be the ball. Pull the string taut and measure half the diameter of the ball. Using our previous example of a 16-inch ball, that would be equal to eight inches. Mark the string. Keep the string tight and clip all stems that extend past the string. Rotate the string up and down the stem until you've created a ball.

It may take a few months to create a tight ball. Be patient, the shorter stems will grow out. Continue trimming back the longer stems to the mark on the string.

Plant Name		Pollarding	Coppicing	Limbing Up	Standard
Tree or Shrub					
Serviceberry	<i>Amelanchier</i>			●	
Willow	<i>Salix</i>		●		
Tree					
Amur Maple	<i>Acer ginnala</i>		●	●	
Ash	<i>Fraxinus</i>	●			
Beech	<i>Fagus</i>	●			
Black Locust	<i>Robinia</i>	●			
Catalpa		●			
Crabapple	<i>Malus</i>				●
Hornbeam	<i>Carpinus</i>	●	●		
Linden	<i>Tilia</i>	●			
London Planetree	<i>Platanus x acerfolia</i>	●			
Oak	<i>Quercus</i>	●			
Poplar	<i>Populus</i>	●			
Redbud	<i>Cercis canadensis</i>	●			
Smoketree	<i>Cotinus</i>	●	●		●
Sycamore	<i>Platanus occidentalis</i>	●			
Willow	<i>Salix</i>	●	●		
Shrub					
Boxwood	<i>Buxus</i>				●
Buckthorn	<i>Rhamnus frangula</i>			●	
Butterfly Bush	<i>Buddleia alternifolia</i>		●		●
Firethorn	<i>Pyracantha</i>				●
Lilac	<i>Syringa vulgaris</i>			●	●
Little Girl Hybrids	<i>Magnolia hybrids</i>			●	
Ninebark	<i>Physocarpus</i>		●		
Privet	<i>Ligustrum</i>				●
Redtwig dogwood	<i>Cornus sericea</i>		●		
Rose of Sharon	<i>Althea</i>			●	●
Star Magnolia	<i>Magnolia stellata</i>			●	
Tatarian dogwood	<i>Cornus alba</i>		●		
Viburnum				●	
Yew	<i>Taxus</i>				●

Sources

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