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Pruning *Hydrangea arborescens* 'Invincibelle Mini Mauvette' in late winter  
*Photo by Brenda Sharp*

## **When to Prune Flowering Trees and Shrubs**

By Cathy Slavin

As warmer days crop up among the remnants of winter (and March is definitely winter in Falmouth) it's time to start late winter pruning. Pruning now is recommended for many shrubs and trees, but not for all shrubs. We want to be careful not to cut off potential flowers (buds) for the coming season.

A safe rule is: Prune flowering trees and shrubs when their blooms fade. The goal is to cut off excess growth and shape plants before they set buds for their next blooming cycle. There are, however, advantages to pruning woody plants when dormant. Dormancy reduces the flow of sap so fresh cuts cause less stress and heal better. Plus, fewer insects and pathogens are around to infect the cuts while they heal. This makes dormant pruning ideal for plants that bloom on new wood.

Here's the routine that I follow.

**Anytime, Any Plant:** Prune off dead, diseased, damaged, crossing or wild branches that are affecting the appearance of the plant.

**Late Winter Tree Pruning:** Prune young or small trees when dormant for shape, size and structure. The USDA Forest Service has a succinct publication, aptly called “How to Prune Trees.” Consult an arborist for larger trees.

**Late Winter Shrub Pruning:** Prune late summer/fall flowering shrubs now, since these largely bloom on new wood. This includes *Hydrangea paniculata* (such as ‘Limelight’) and *Hydrangea arborescens* (‘Anna’/Incrediball®). Pruning these shrubs helps control size and encourage strong branches. I take mine back by about one third every year to just above a set of strong buds (I wait for the buds to begin to swell) and I remove any spindly branches that won’t support their large flowers.

Conversely, wait until after bloom to prune *Hydrangea macrophylla* (our beloved mophead), *serrata* (lace cap) and *quercifolia* (oak leaf). These shrubs already set buds last growing season for their first bloom of this season and you don’t want to cut those buds off. You can cut off dead flower heads but cut above the uppermost set of buds. After the shrub has leafed out, you can prune out anything that seems dead and any spindly branches.

I also prune beautyberry (*Callicarpa*), coralberry and bluebeard (*Caryopteris*) at this time to about 8-10 inches tall. It feels brutal, but they will grow back during the season and flower/fruit more prolifically.

**Spring Pruning:** Spring flowering shrubs such as forsythia should be pruned right after bloom. If you prune later, you will cut off next spring’s flower buds. Azalea, rhododendron, pieris and laurel should also be pruned after flowering, if needed.

Weigela and ninebark are also spring flowering but they form lovely graceful shapes that, given enough space, don’t really require pruning and won’t always recover their shape after a hard prune. If you must, prune after flowering.

**Shearing:** Boxwoods, hollies (*Ilex*), privet (*Ligustrum*), yew and other hedging plants should be sheared after danger of hard frost in spring and/or three to four weeks before likely hard frost in fall. Shearing encourages growth and you want to avoid sun scald and hard frost on that tender new growth. Avoid shearing in mid-summer heat. Choose a cool, cloudy day with others like it in the near forecast.

Space and my knowledge/experience prevent an exhaustive list of plant by plant discussion and the newer reblooming shrubs complicate matters. Thankfully, good resources are available, including breeders’ websites (often University associated) and Michael A. Dirr’s comprehensive Manual of Woody Landscape Plants, available by request through our CLAMS library network.

Happy pruning and remember to sanitize your pruners between plants with alcohol or disinfectant wipes!