Pruning Techniques

Pruning requires care and an interest in how the shrub will look when you are done. How does it look now? What do you want to achieve with pruning? How do you want it to look when you are done? Think about these questions and make sure you really know your shrub before you start. Observation will make all the difference.

Use sharp, clean tools so that each cut will be clean and will not tear the branch. Tears, or wounds, will invite insects and increase the potential for infestation. After each shrub, wipe your tools with disinfectant wipes to reduce the possibility of transferring any disease from one shrub to another in the pruning process.

The basic pruning sequence is as follows, for shaping a shrub:

Clean up the area around your shrub before you start to remove any debris and disease. Cut off dead branches as part of this clean-up. Now you can step back and look at your shrub with a pruner's eye! Look at the structure of the shrub and note how it grows (individual branches from the ground like forsythia, lateral branches from a single or multiple trunks like viburnum, etc.)

Next follow these steps:

1. If you want a more open look to your shrub, remove all criss-crossed branches on the outside of the shrub at this point. If you want a compact bush, skip this step and go to the next step.

2. Use hand shears to head back the branches on the outside of the shrub to the approximate contour you want.
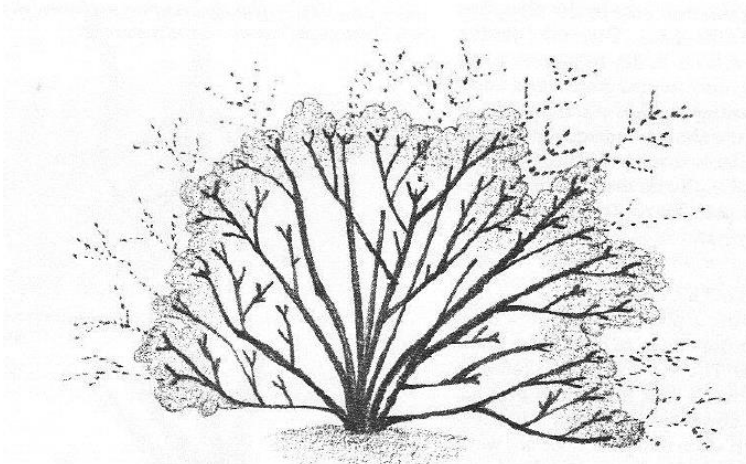
3. Use your loppers or hand saw to thin the shrub. Remove branches growing along the ground and at least one-third of the large, old branches in the center of the shrub. These should all be removed at ground level.

4. Continue thinning by look at the inside of the shrub for other damaged branches that need to be cut away. You will use your loppers or hand shears depending on space and size of the branch.

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5. Complete thinning by looking carefully inside your shrub and cutting to eliminate criss-crossed branches. When deciding which branch to cut, remove the one that looks least healthy or the one growing in the lease desirable direction for the growth you want. How you cut will depend on two things: the growth pattern of the shrub and the look you want – either dense and compact or open.

It's critically important to know when to prune. General rules are:

Prune early blooming shrubs immediately after they finish blooming:
* Azalea & Rhododendron
* Lilacs
* Serviceberry
* Magnolia

Shrubs grown primarily for foliage rather than flowers should be pruned in late winter before growth begins:
* Alpine Currant
* Dogwood
* Burning Bush
* Smokebush
* Ninebark
* Honeysuckle

Shrubs that can be pruned throughout growing season:
* Spirea - After first bloom, will re-bloom
* Weigela - After first bloom, will re-bloom
* Potentilla - After first bloom, will re-bloom
* Rose of Sharon - After first bloom, will re-bloom