

# Pruning Evergreens and Conifers — When, Why and How ?

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First, let's define the difference between evergreens and conifers.

**Evergreens** are plants that retain their foliage all year long. This includes trees and shrubs . . .

- With needles — called *needle-leaved* evergreens or conifers.
- With leaves — called *broadleaf* evergreens — like rhododendron, azalea and holly.

**Conifers** are chiefly needle-leaved or scale-leaved evergreen trees and shrubs that bear cones. Common examples are fir, pine, hemlock and spruce. (A few conifers, like Larch and Dawn Redwood, are deciduous. That is, they lose their leaves once a year in the fall.) Most conifers produce strong, upright, dominant leaders causing a typical conical or pyramidal growth habit. *With few exceptions, conifers do best with minimal pruning.* Once mature, it is wise not to prune unless absolutely necessary. It is, therefore, best to choose a conifer that will not outgrow its space in the landscape, and will only need occasional pruning to maintain its shape or remove a problem.

## Pruning before Planting

Pruning may be required before transplanting a shrub. At this time, prune to remove all damaged or broken roots, to head back any overgrown branches without losing the natural shape of the shrub, and to bring the branch structures into balance with the remaining root system.

## Pruning after Planting

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|------------------------------|---|
| <b>Broken leader</b>         | Remove all the damage to the leader, cutting back as closely as possible to the closest, strongest, upright shoot. Insert a stake beside the new leader and tie it to the stake. Remove the stake once the leader is strong.  |
| <b>Competing leader</b>      | This is often a side shoot that is growing crooked. Remove immediately so the leader is not weakened.   |
| <b>Removing dead patches</b> | Clear the dead foliage. If open holes are remaining, the areas will eventually fill in, but it may take a season.   |
| <b>Thinning</b>              | Remove crowded shoots cleanly at their base. When pruning, try to avoid the “dead zone.” This occurs in older shrubs such as junipers and arborvitae where the density of the shrub does not allow the sun to reach the center and the foliage dies. The brown inner branches will rarely produce new growth. |

**Maintaining shape**

If there are a few branches that look unsightly and out of balance, a light pruning can be performed to maintain the natural form. Bear in mind that the rest of the shrub will fill out the larger growth.

With dwarf conifers, it may be necessary to remove a shoot that has reverted back to the original stock. Prune this shoot back to maintain form.

## Pruning Tools

It is important to have the correct tools. They must be well sharpened and clean.

- Pruners are the most useful cutting tool and can be used for all soft wood growth and woody stems up to one-half inch.
- Loppers are more effective on thicker branches.
- By-pass pruners and loppers provide the cleanest cuts and, generally, will not “chew” the wood.
- A pruning saw designed for the garden can be used for cutting thick woody growth and cleaning away stubs. Be aware that green wood clogs the saw quickly.
- A garden or pruning knife is also useful for smoothing cuts.



**Caution:** If a ladder is required to do any pruning, call a professional.

## How to Prune

When holding the pruner, the thinner blade — the upper blade — should always be closest to the stem joint on which you are cutting. Generally, the rounded portion of the tool is away from the trunk and towards the ground.

When pruning any plant, always prune back to the next branch or bud and to healthy wood. The “thinning out” method of pruning is recommended for most evergreens. Any cut should start parallel to a bud or twig that will produce new growth. A branch is cut off at its point of origin to the parent stem or to a lateral side branch. This method of pruning is least conspicuous, results in a more open plant and does not stimulate excessive new growth. Also, more growth can be removed and not alter the natural appearance of the plant

## Pruning Needle-Leafed Plants

**Arborvitae**

- Pruning is best done when new growth begins to appear in mid-March to April before the second growth spurt.
- Can be pruned in the same manner as junipers. Take care not to prune into the dead zone.

- Firs** Prune only to remove injured or diseased branches and to maintain a central leader.
- Junipers**
- Early spring is the best time to prune dominant branches back to side branches.
  - If the size of the plant needs to be contained, remove the entire branch as often vigorous, lateral branches develop from each dominant limb.
  - Because of the way the branches form on a juniper, part of the top branch can be removed, if severe pruning is necessary. However, leaving some healthy green foliage on top will ensure the plants survival and hide any dead zones.
- Hemlock** Young trees may require pruning to maintain a central leader. However, little pruning is necessary on mature trees.
- Pines**
- Unless special circumstances require older wood to be removed, prune pines in late spring when buds have made most of their elongation, the tree is full of candles, and the needles are beginning to grow.
  - The height and width can be controlled, encouraging a more dense growth, by pruning the candles back to one-half to two-thirds.
  - Allow the central leader to grow its length, then cut it back to approximately 12 inches.
  - Terminals of top side branches are cut 4 inches shorter than the leader. All other side laterals are cut as needed to achieve the desired pyramidal form.
  - Pines seldom produce new buds or shoots along existing branches. New growth is produced from buds already formed.
- Spruces**
- Pruning can begin in early spring before new growth begins.
  - Pruning consists of cutting back one-year-old shoots (last year's growth), making the cut to one of the lateral side buds.
  - Leaders can be shortened to reduce open spaces or produce a more compact tree.
  - Remove older wood back to another shoot or branch. Do not leave stubs.
- Yew (Taxus)**
- Pruning is best done in the early spring prior to the start of new growth. If pruning is delayed until summer, the dormant buds already present may not send out growth until the following spring.
  - These have a dead zone, but can withstand drastic pruning because cuts into this area will result in new growth from dormant buds.

## Pruning Broad-Leafed Plants

In general, if pruning is needed on broadleaf evergreens to thin out growth or maintain shape, it should be done in early spring or after flowering. Remove old flower clusters to encourage new growth and flower bud formation. Although broadleaf evergreens require little pruning if planted with adequate space for growing, pruning may be needed to maintain shape and encourage new growth.

- Hollies**
- Many are very tolerant of severe pruning. Over-grown hollies have been cut back to 12 to 24 inches in late winter and have produced “. . . new shoots that covered the old trunk and stems by May-June . . .” (Dirr)
  - Others should be pruned after the new growth has hardened off.
  - It would be prudent to check the pruning suggestions for specific hollies.

**Rhododendrons  
and azaleas**

- Deadhead and prune to keep plants in good shape and to speed up flower production.
- After the single bud is removed, the plant immediately produces multiple growth buds in place of the single bud. This results in additional branches and a fuller plant.
- If rhododendrons are pruned too severely, they may not produce flowers for one to two years. Flowers bloom on last year's growth. However, it is important to prune weak limbs of branches that are crossing or touching the ground.

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