



## Pruning Spring-Blooming Shrubs

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One of the early signs of spring in the valley is our spring-blooming shrubs and small trees. We have shrubs such as azaleas, camellias, and small trees such as deciduous magnolia, dogwood and lilac that tell us winter is over and spring is here.

The perfect time to do any necessary pruning is once they have finished blooming. The key word is necessary. Not every shrub or small tree needs to be heavily pruned every year, but most benefit from a light shaping. Prune only to maintain their desired size and to promote healthy new growth. Sometimes pruning at the wrong time, results in no flowers the following year or a weak over-pruned plant.

Azaleas and camellias are not considered drought-tolerant, and we don't commonly recommend planting either of these shrubs in new gardens. However, many of us have them in our established gardens, planted long before the drought, and it is important to keep them healthy enough to withstand the lower watering restrictions set forth by the state. One way to help them survive the drought is to keep the soil heavily mulched--at least three inches deep around the plant. Mulching helps the soil retain moisture and established older plants (especially camellias) will survive and even thrive on fairly little supplemental watering.

For an azalea, wait to prune until the flowers are spent and have become discolored and shriveled. But don't wait until late in the summer or fall. By then the shrub will have set flower buds for the following year. Pruning off the flower buds will obviously prevent the bushes from blooming. (*I learned that the hard way!*)

When pruning, some shrubs are better suited than others for a formal, boxy shape. Azaleas do not do well when pruned formally. They are better suited for a more natural style of pruning that is only slightly rounded with bottom branches being slightly longer than top branches so that all leaves receive light. Pruning incorrectly can result in spotty flowering and splotchy growth of branches.

Before you begin to prune, mentally picture how you would like the azalea to look. (Do you want to maintain its size? Or do you want to rejuvenate the plant?) Select a branch that extends past the size you want to maintain and cut it back. Use pruners (not hedge shears) and cut individual branches. Cut here and there rather than along a straight line. Try not to cut any one branch back by more than a third. Azaleas will grow new branches from right below your cut so you do not need to cut back to a connecting branch.

Pruning an azalea plant will rejuvenate the plant and make it fuller because of the way it grows new branches at the cut. Removing some of the long stray shoots will open up the center of the shrub and allow sunlight and air movement into the center of the shrub. This keeps the plant healthy and discourages pests.

The Camellia is another late winter-early spring-blooming shrub. And, like the azalea, the best time to prune a camellia is after it has stopped blooming. That is usually in May or June. Pruning the plant at other times may remove some of the buds that will bloom the following year. Try keeping the center of the camellia plant partially open for air flow and sunlight to prevent twiggy growth and disease and pest problems. Prune back or

remove small, leggy, or weak branches that are not main branches. Shaping the plant will keep the plant vigorous by encouraging new growth, which will increase the number of blooms.

Like the shrubs, small deciduous trees such as the star and saucer magnolias and the dogwood should be pruned only when needed, and only when they have finished blooming in midsummer or early fall. Shorten long branches and remove lower ones. Remove weak or damaged branches. Over-pruning can cause stress. Better too little than too much.



A lilac tree benefits from periodic pruning to keep it healthy and looking its best. Annually removing a few of the oldest stems encourages new young shoots to develop. Lilacs can become too tall and unmanageable if you don't prune them to maintain their height. Remove the old flower clusters and cut back to a pair of leaves. Growth buds at that point will make flowering stems for next year.

When pruning any shrub or small tree, use clean, sharp pruning shears or loppers. Be careful to make good cuts that do not tear or injure the bark.

In summary, the spring-blooming shrubs and small trees do not need heavy pruning. They can benefit from annual light pruning, keeping the centers open, and cutting out dead wood for a more attractive shape.

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