



SELECTING THE RIGHT PRUNING TOOLS

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Successful pruning starts with the right tools. Focus on quality pruning tools and they will stand the test of time. They'll cost more, but high-quality tools offer replacement parts, withstand repeated use and sharpenings, and can last a lifetime with proper care.

Choosing the right tool for a cutting job hinges on the size of branches you'll be pruning. In general, hand pruners can be used on branches up to 3/4", loppers on branches up to 2", pruning saws on branches up to 3", and pole pruners for branches up to 2". Brands such as ARS, Bahco, Corona, Felco, and Fiskars are the major pruning tool makers and offer a variety of hand pruners, loppers, pruning saws, and pole pruners. These are also the brands that tend to have the highest ratings.



Hand Pruners

Two types of cutting blades to choose from.

- **Bypass** – you get a clean cut from 2 curved blades that move past each other like a pair of scissors. One blade is sharp and cuts as it moves by a thicker unsharpened blade. Cleanest cut and easiest to use.
- **Anvil** – one straight blade that cuts as it closes onto a flat edge. Action is similar to that of a knife on a cutting board. Best used on dead wood as the blade crushes stems/branches when cutting.

The best blades are made of high quality hardened or carbon steel. They are more expensive but less likely to nick, bend, or need frequent sharpening. Look for ergonomic design features if you'll be doing a lot of pruning. You'll appreciate the way these tools reduce wrist strain, require less pressure to close and reduce hand fatigue.

Hand pruners come in different sizes and weights so make sure you choose the one that's right for you. If the size is too small or too large your hand may become fatigued. If they are too heavy you're more likely to become fatigued. To avoid purchasing the wrong hand pruners go to a retailer that will allow you to test different makes and models.

Other features you'll want are ease of disassembly (necessary for easy maintenance), strong spring (must be tightly attached to avoid accidentally popping off), and locking mechanism (protects the blades when not in use and protects you from accidentally cutting yourself).

Loppers

First, look at the lopper label to make sure it will cut the branch size you'll be pruning today as well as in the future.

Many lopper features to be aware of are the same as those for hand pruners. The blade types are the same and bypass is preferred over anvil. Over the long run you'll be better off with high quality hardened or carbon steel blades, choosing a lopper that's the correct size and weight for you physically, and is easy to disassemble for routine maintenance. There are also ergonomically designed loppers to better fit your hands.

Some lopper designs include a gear-like feature that increases cutting power, essentially multiplying your effort. Look for loppers with handles in varying lengths, including ones that telescope to extend your reach. Many loppers have a rubber or plastic bumper or shock absorber just below the cutting blades to prevent the handles from crashing together as each cut is completed. These bumpers add to the cost but increase efficiency making it money well spent. Another feature to consider is telescoping handles which will allow you to reach further with your loppers.

Pruning Saws

Available as folding saws (smaller branches) or fixed blade saws (larger branches). Most pruning saws are designed to cut branches with a diameter of 2" to 3", although with more effort you can use them to cut slightly larger branches. The reason for buying a special garden pruning saw is that they are designed with sticky, gummy plants in mind which means they won't get stuck or bind when cutting.

A tempered steel blade is a non-negotiable requirement for pruning saws. Tri-edged blades ('pull-saws') are replacing traditional lance-toothed saws for garden use. Tri-edge saws have three bevels on each tooth giving the saw a faster, smoother action. The design of the tri-edge also means that the teeth are self-cleaning. Curved pruning saws require less effort than straight-edged saws because the teeth penetrate the wood more easily.

The connection between the blade and the handle must be solid. A wooden handle will absorb more of the cutting vibrations than a plastic handle.

Bow saws come in a variety of sizes and can cut branches up to about a foot in thickness. For home use, a 21" or 24" bow saw should be able to do the job. The teeth are big and splay out wide. They clear plenty of wood as they cut so the blade will never stick. A sharp bow saw and a strong arm will cut up medium-sized, branches quicker than many power saws.

Pole and Rope Saws

Allow you to cut branches that are beyond your reach. Most of these saws cut limbs up to 2" or 3" in diameter. For the cleanest, healthiest cuts, choose a bypass-style pruner.

For versatility in tackling larger branches, purchase a pole pruner that includes interchangeable cutting tools for the pruning head: a bypass pruner and a pruning saw.

These saws can do the tough jobs that are hard to reach but they are difficult and time consuming to use. Balancing the pole, getting to the correct limb, staying out of the way of falling branches, and the reaction of your shoulders to using this tool are some of the downsides to using pole and rope saws.

Tool Maintenance

Sharp tools produce the best cuts and reduce cutting fatigue. Use a sharpening stone or device to hone cutting edges of hand pruners, loppers and pole pruners. For dull pruning saws, have them professionally sharpened or install a replacement blade.

Sanitize tools between cuts, especially when you know you're dealing with a diseased tree. Pruning cuts provide the perfect entry point for disease organisms such as bacteria, fungi or other microorganisms. You can reduce the need for sanitizing tools between cuts by pruning during the dormant season, when disease organisms are inactive.

To disinfect tools between cuts, immerse blades for 1 to 2 minutes in rubbing alcohol, Lysol or Listerine. Bleach (10%) and Pine-Sol also sanitize tools, but corrode metal. If you use these items, clean tools with soap and water at days end after immersing them in the sanitizing solution. Dry thoroughly before using.

After use, clean cutting blades. Remove sticky sap by cleaning with soap and water. Rub blades with lubricating oil or spray with cooking oil to prevent rust. Lubricating joints and moving parts keep tools operating smoothly.

Safety

Always inspect your pruning tools before using to determine if they are functioning properly. Make sure all moveable joints are lubricated and not loose, and blades are sharpened properly.

Safety glasses are a must. Gloves, long-sleeved shirts, and long pants will provide protection from branches.

Do not attempt to cut branches with a diameter larger than the pruning tool was designed to cut. If you do you run the risk of personal injury as well as damaging the pruning tool.

Always carry pruning tools with the sharp end pointed down.

Most accidents with pruning tools occur when the user is fatigued so when you feel yourself tiring stop pruning and take a break.

Last, but not least, put your cell phone in your pocket just in case you need to make an emergency call.