**Ask Dr. Fill**

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**Dear Dr. Fill**

I am hoping that you can provide some information on winter pruning, which is often recommended in books and magazines. Can we prune here while there’s still snow on the ground, or are these articles written for gardeners in warmer climates? The articles rarely mention a specific month. I’m wondering if there any good reasons to do it while it is still cold outside? I have always waited until early spring, just prior to leaf break, to do my pruning chores. If it would be healthier for my trees and shrubs to prune now, I would consider it, but I really can’t imagine that it would be very enjoyable until it warms up a bit more! **Sincerely, Afraid of the Cold**

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**Dear Afraid of the Cold** I believe you answered your own question when you described it as not very enjoyable, and typically in our area the only people pruning while it’s still “really cold winter weather” outside are people with a lot of pruning to do. In general, winter pruning is just another term for dormant pruning – removing branches while the plant is not actively growing.

There is certainly no benefit to pruning in sub-zero temperatures in most cases. In fact, you would probably harm some branches which could easily snap off in extreme cold. But you certainly could start pruning in March and April for SOME trees.

As with all things gardening, you’re sure to find lots of gardeners arguing about the “best” time to prune. And in a few cases, it does depend on the particular variety of fruit tree or flowering tree that you are growing. So when in doubt, it’s worth checking on the particular variety in your garden.

That being said, the experts have changed some of their advice around certain trees. For years, it was said that a few trees should never be pruned in the late winter or early spring. These were the group of trees known as "**bleeders**". In the past it was always advised that they should be pruned in summer after they leaf out. During late winter and early spring the sap is rising, and these trees will "bleed" from open wounds. It was always acknowledged that this often does not significantly harm the trees but it can provide a site for disease infection, as the wound is left open for a longer time. **Maple trees** were likely the most notorious in this group of trees, which also included birch, beech, oaks, lindens, and elms. In the past, the advice was to leave those alone, unless there’d been a huge limb damaged in a winter storm that needed to be pruned off before it was ripped off in a windstorm

However, arborists and Departments of Agriculture now say something a bit different!

Their newest advice for us here in Zone 5 is that most deciduous trees that need pruning should be cut back **between** **February and mid April.** The large amount of sap in the tree at this time helps it to heal quickly. The tree's energy reserves drop as the leaves begin to appear and again as they fall. That makes pruning them in later spring through the summer and into the fall a very poor time to prune them. And of course, it’s easy to see their real shape when there are no leaves in the way!

If you Google pruning techniques for deciduous trees, you’ll no doubt come across many warnings about pruning oak trees – insisting that they MUST be pruned before early April. This is because a deadly fungus, known as oak wilt, is killing huge old oaks in warmer zones Luckily, we don’t yet have the beetles that carry this fungus here in the Moncton area - at least not yet! Right now it’s just threatening some trees in the most southerly parts of Ontario. So if you’re on an American website getting your pruning advice it’s best to leave it and find a Canadian site – and better yet, a New Brunswick site - so the information fits our climate.

Spring flowering trees and shrubs **should definitely not be pruned now** if you want to see them bloom this spring – they need to be pruned soon after flowering, as pruning before they bloom would mean no flowers this year, and waiting too long after they bloom would mean you are removing next spring’s flower buds which form not long after flowering. So don’t touch **lilac, forsythia, weigela, azalea, mock orange**, and other spring bloomers until after their flowers fade. But once they do fade, don’t wait – do your pruning before the new buds form. Pruning early in the season will give new buds the rest of the summer to develop; if you wait too long you risk removing next spring’s flower buds. These flowering shrubs really do thrive if pruned in late spring or early summer. The plant's energy returns after the hard work of producing buds and blooms is past, and they can put that energy into healing themselves.

Of course, it’s personal preference whether to keep your lilacs to a manageable height or let them grow tall. But remember that if left to grow on their own without any pruning, many older varieties of lilacs could reach heights of 15 feet or taller, and they get quite gangly looking and pruning at that point becomes a real chore. It’s much easier to prune regularly to keep them “manageable”.

To keep your lilac shrub looking rejuvenated, remove about 1/3 of its stems. Prune dead or diseased stems, pencil thin suckers, twiggy growth and branches that grow across one another. Trim large stems from the center of the shrub to allow air circulation and room for new shoots on the outside of the plant to develop.

**Summer flowering shrubs** are pruned very differently from those spring flowering ones. The most popular ones in this category are potentilla and spirea.

These summer flowering shrubs produce flowers on new growth. So they can be pruned back hard in the fall, or if you didn’t get it done then, you can prune them back hard now – BEFORE any sign of new growth is showing.

Many of these shrubs tolerate severe pruning, but if you can’t bring yourself to do that, there is a more moderate approach that allows you to control growth and encourages sturdier stems. Cut all the stems of potentilla and spirea back halfway to the ground. (This of course refers to the summer blooming spireas – not the spring blooming bridal wreath varieties that need to be pruned immediately after blooming). Then remove about half of the older and thicker stems to ground level. New shoots will emerge in spring. The older remaining stems will provide support for the thinner often floppy new growth. As I mentioned earlier, when you ask two gardeners how to prune specific plants, you’ll often get two very different answers. Those in favour of leaving some of the older growth in place will insist that it’s the best way to insure you have green new growth from ground to stem tip and a sturdier neater plant for you to enjoy. Those in favour of pruning back all the old growth will disagree! My advice is to try it one way and if it doesn’t result in the look you want, try it the other way next year. Shrubs like potentilla and spirea can endure a lot of abuse! But if yours weren’t pruned hard in the fall, now’s the time to get out there and do it – one way or the other!

You can prune **broadleaf evergreens** like hollies and euonymus now if they need it. For these plants, focus on fixing plant shape, removing wayward branches or thinning unwanted branches. Avoid cutting into old wood as it may not re-grow.

**Evergreen trees** are dormant during the winter, and **pruning them now** as the dormant period comes to an end is the best bet if you are just removing unwanted lower branches. For spruce and fir trees, this is also a good time for major tree trimming to limit annual growth. Pines, on the other hand, should not be trimmed until summer. During June and into early July, pine trees are experiencing a surge in new growth, and these new candles can simply be snapped off for thinning.

Other trees that you should prune in “winter” (while they are still dormant and very often there are days when this would be a very tolerable chore while there is still lots of snow on the ground) include **apples, flowering crab apples, and mountain ash**. These frequently get bacterial diseases and other diseases such as stem canker if pruned later in the spring.

**Fruit trees** should almost always be pruned in late winter while the tree is still dormant and definitely **before buds begin to swell**. They should never be pruned in fall or winter, as many are especially susceptible to damage from the cold temperatures. This can impact the production of fruit in the following spring and summer, and can cause other issues to the tree depending on the severity of the damage. In some cases, a late fall or early winter pruning followed by a harsh winter can kill a fruit tree. While pruning in the correct spot is important on all trees, proper pruning of fruit trees is really important. If you’re new to it, it’s really important to do some research on the particular type of fruit that you are growing as improper pruning can lead to no fruit at all.

Summer-flowering shrubs, such as **hydrangea**, should be pruned in late winter or very early spring when buds have not formed yet. When pruning hydrangeas in the spring, cut off twigs that flowered last year back to the first big bud from the tip. Make sure to leave this bud as it will form this year's flower.

When it comes to pruning **grapes**, I follow the lead of Bob Osbourne at Cornhill. In order to prevent sap bleed he suggests that fall (November) is the best time to prune, when the wood has hardened off and become dormant. He suggests that spring pruning can be done as well, but the plants will bleed sap for several weeks, which can attract insects and fungi.

In very general terms, pruning in late winter or early spring is good in the sense that diseases are not active then to invade the open wounds. When the plants resume growth in the spring, the wounds will heal rapidly. Pruning in late winter, especially if severe pruning, will stimulate the plant to replace leaves and shoots first, perhaps at the expense of flowering, so is a fact to keep in mind if flowering is important.

There is no doubt that knowing when to prune is just as important as knowing why and how. But because our springs can come very early or arrive very late, as you said, it’s impossible to offer specific dates as the best times.

So you certainly could have been pruning in the late winter if you have a lot of pruning to do, but otherwise, waiting until now has certainly made the job more tolerable. And remember, be sure that your pruning tools are very sharp, and disinfect them if you are removing any branches that may be infected with fungal or bacterial diseases. And most gardeners are now aware that the old advice about painting over a pruning cut was bad advice. Make a good, clean cut and then leave it alone to allow the tree to heal the wound on its own. Happy Pruning!. . **Dr. Fill**