

**“I CAN SEE CLEARLY NOW...ALL OBSTACLES IN MY WAY”:
SOME DOS AND DON'TS OF PRUNING**

By Maritta Perry Grau, Frederick County Master Gardener, February, 2024

As I write this column, I just can't get Johnny Nash's 1972 song, "I Can See Clearly Now," out of my head. One of the advantages of this dormant, leafless season is that I can see more clearly than during other seasons where I need to prune trees, shrubs, and vines.

Are you itching to get to those broken and diseased limbs? Or are you a little hesitant to grab long pole pruners, shears, and saws? Wondering just what to do? One of the best sites to check on how to proceed with pruning is [Pruning Trees in the Home Landscape | University of Maryland Extension \(umd.edu\)](https://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county). There, you'll find not only excellent advice, but also lots of diagrams and photographs to illustrate that advice.

Why prune now instead of in warmer months? Pruning now has several advantages. You usually don't have to deal with disease, insects, or sap oozing out of trees; you can more easily see where branches rub against each other and where "water sprouts" are (vertical branches growing straight up from a horizontal branch); where you want to shape the tree; and where to thin the canopy to allow better air circulation and light into the interior of deciduous trees.

Ready to start pruning?

- **First**, notice the small collar of wood surrounding the base of the branch, where it attaches to a larger branch or to the trunk. Cut close enough to that collar so that you don't leave a branch stub sticking out, but **do** leave that small branch collar attached to the tree.
- **Do** remove dead and diseased branches. You may have quite a few of those after January's snow and ice! Where possible, cut back broken branches to that collar mentioned above.
- **For most trees**, don't remove more than about one-fourth of the live branches; however, check the *Old Farmer's Almanac* or other web site for pruning fruit trees.
- **Don't** remove too many branches when planting a tree. Although gardeners used to advise removing a lot of the upper branches to balance what was lost in the transfer of the root system with a newly planted tree, now, experts know that "leaves and shoot tips provide food and growth substances that stimulate root production," according to the UMD extension service web site.
- Where branches cross/rub against each other, cut off one of the branches; keep the branch that grows in a more outward direction.

While much of the advice on pruning remains the same, one popular bit has changed: whether or not to paint over the stub of a branch removed. The answer is a resounding no; don't use sealant in most cases.

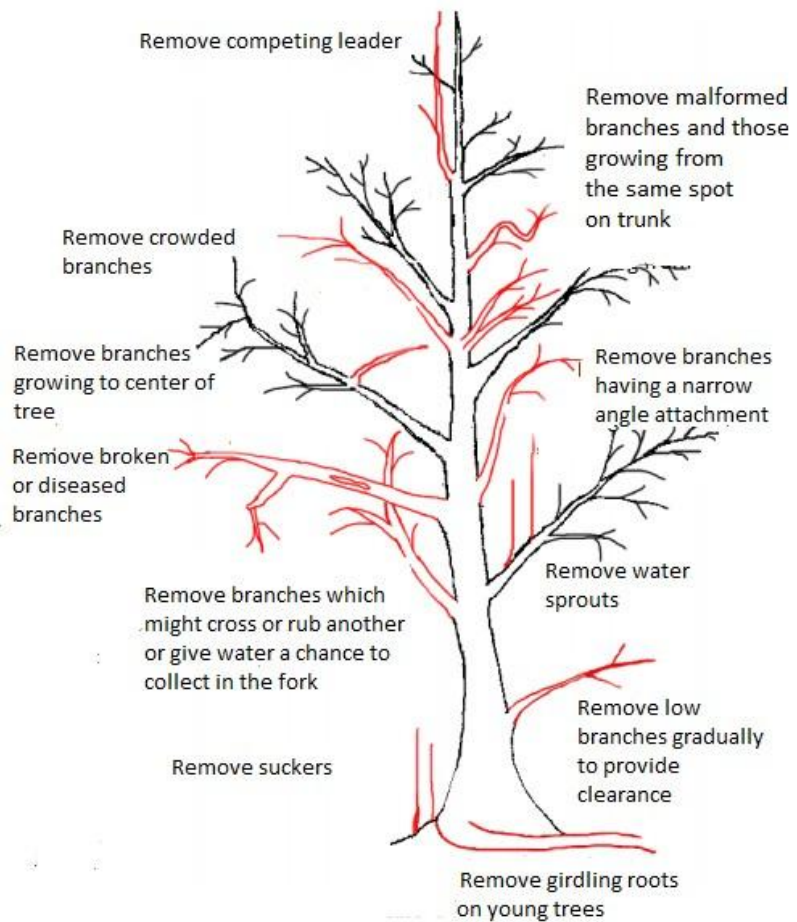
As a young gardener, I was taught—and read in many gardening books—that when pruning, I should paint the resultant tree wounds with a sealant. However, in more recent research, scientists have determined that most trees actually mend their own wounds and suffer fewer attacks of disease and pests without a sealant.

Scientists call the tree’s ability to mend its wounds “compartmentalizing”; that is, the tree isolates the place where a branch has been removed. Slowly, the tree forms a natural scab, or callus, a specialized wood that surrounds and gradually creeps over the wound from the edges and eventually to the center; harmful organisms, as well as internal rot, are repelled by this callus.



Compartmentalization: The tree compartmentalizes, forming a callus or “scab” to naturally seal over a wound, helping to protect the tree from invasive diseases and pests. When pruning, it’s better to make small cuts where possible, as that does less damage and requires less repair work for the plant. *(photo courtesy of Master Gardener Don Stanley)*

Pruning diagram: We prune trees, shrubs, and vines for numerous reasons, such as removing dead or diseased wood; helping newly planted trees and shrubs get established more quickly; restricting or directing growth and shape; and maintaining or improving plant health. *(Diagram courtesy of University of Maryland Extension)*



*Illustration of Reasons to Prune Trees (red branches are to be removed)
Credit: Don Wittig, former UME Master Gardener*

Trees and Shrubs to Prune in Late Winter or Early Spring

(source: *The Old Farmer's Almanac*)

	WHEN	HOW
Apple	Late winter to early spring	Prune moderately. Keep tree open with the main branches well-spaced. Avoid sharp V-shaped crotches.
Abelia	Late winter to early spring	Maintain a graceful arching form by cutting away some of the oldest stems at ground level. Pinch growing shoots in spring if you want bushier growth.
Azalea	Late winter or during the growing season	Before growth begins for the season, improve the form of the bush by shortening stems that jut out of place. During the growing season, pinch growing shoot tips where you want bushier growth.
Butterfly bush	Late winter	Cut all stems to the ground.
Chaste tree	Late winter to early spring	Evergreen species need little pruning beyond cutting out weak, twiggy, dead, or broken branches.
Cherry	Late winter to early spring	Prune the most vigorous shoots moderately.
Clethra (Summersweet)	Early spring	Prune moderately. Keep the tree open with the main branches well spaced. Avoid sharp V-shaped crotches.
Crape myrtle	Late winter	Wherever the plant is not totally winter-hardy, cut off winter-killed wood or cut the whole plant to the ground. Little pruning is needed where this plant is cold-hardy.
Dogwood	Late winter to early spring	Prune the most vigorous shoots moderately.
Hibiscus (Rose of Sharon)	Early spring	Prune moderately. Keep the tree open with the main branches well-spaced. Avoid sharp V-shaped crotches.
Hydrangea	Mostly late winter, but it depends on the species	For smooth hydrangea, cut all stems to the ground. For bigleaf or oakleaf hydrangea, cut stems with old flowers still attached to fat flower buds. Some hydrangea are NOT pruned in late winter. Check <i>The Old Farmer's Almanac</i> or other web sites for guides to pruning hydrangea varieties.
Peach	Late winter to early spring	Remove half of last year's growth. Keep tree headed low.
Plum	Late winter to early spring	Cut dead, diseased branches; trim rank growth moderately.
Roses	Early spring	Cut dead and weak growth; cut branches or canes to four or five buds.
Smoke bush	Late winter or early spring, before growth begins	Needs little pruning unless you grow it for its purple leaves rather than for its flowers. In this case, prune severely to stimulate vigorous new growth each spring.

Seeing your way clearly now to take on those pruning chores? Or do you want a little more advice?

Check our website or Facebook for upcoming free seminars, Master Gardener certification classes, as well as other announcements. For more information about the Frederick County Extension Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, gardening information and advice visit: <http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening> or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596. Find us on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland>. UME Home & Garden Information Center, <https://extension.umd.edu/programs/environmentnatural-resources/program-areas/home-and-garden-information-center>.

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