

RiverSmart Maintenance Assistance Program

Fall 2019

PRUNING FOR RIVERSMART GARDENS

The native shrubs in your RiverSmart garden need only minimal pruning throughout the year to maintain a naturalistic appearance. Over time, more extensive pruning may become necessary to correct problems that increase with age and to improve vitality of the plant. Below is a step-by-step guide for pruning woody shrubs in your RiverSmart garden.

What to Prune

- Dead branches, broken branches, and branches that rub against each other: Dead and broken branches can be entry points for pests and diseases. Cut about 6 inches into healthy wood to remove diseases that may have taken over the damaged branch.
- Stems that are growing too close together: Shrubs with multiple stems growing from the ground can become too crowded over time and prevent space for new growth. Prune out a few of the tallest and thickest stems at ground level.
- Suckering growth located on branches or roots: Root suckers and branch suckers, also called waterspouts, are actually new plants that compete with the main shrub. They are typically fast growing shoots that may have a slightly different appearance from the rest of the shrub. Suckers should be pruned back at ground level or where they attach to a branch.

How to Prune

- In general, pruning should be done sparingly in a naturalistic manner, and only to correct problems or encourage stronger growth. Proper tools will make the work easier - see link for detailed information, finegardening.com/survey-of-pruning-tools.
- A proper pruning cut is one that is made at an angle just above a viable bud (see video link, finegardening.com/where-to-cut). The bud is located where a leaf attaches to a branch. In the winter when deciduous leaves have dropped, there will be a leaf scar in place of a leaf.
- It is never beneficial to the health or productivity of a native shrub to be sheared or shaped as is the practice with many commonly used ornamental plants.

When to Prune

- For most shrubs, pruning should take place in late winter or early spring, February through March. It is during the winter months that the structure of the shrub is most visible, as are problems within the branching structure or on the trunk.
- Early Flowering: Early-flowering shrubs should be pruned shortly after flowering. New flower buds are formed on the previous year's stem growth so pruning too early will mean removing next season's flowers. Pruning too long after bloom can also be problematic because these shrubs need sufficient time before fall to develop next year's flower buds.
- Late Flowering: Prune late-flowering shrubs before spring growth in late fall through late winter, November through February. These shrubs form flower buds on current year's growth.