

# PRUNING FLOWERING SHRUBS

Nothing says you *have to* prune your flowering shrubs. But in many cases, you will want to prune them every year in order to keep them well shaped and more compact than they would be if you left them unpruned. And young shrubs that you have just planted in the last two or three years definitely benefit from being cut back, which will cause them to make more side branches and fill out better, and prevent them from getting tall and leggy.

**Prune after blooming:** In general, spring flowering shrubs should be cut back right after they are done blooming. This allows the plant to grow back into a well-shaped shrub which will provide maximum flowering the following year. Pruning these in the fall or early spring will simply result in cutting off the outer layer that will provide the most blooms. And in the case of graceful, fountain-like shrubs such as **Bridal Wreath Spiraea** or **Forsythia**, such pruning would not only remove much of the flowering part of the plant, but would destroy the gracefulness, resulting in a stiff looking shrub with little bloom.

I have several **Dwarf Korean Lilacs** (*Syringa* 'Palibin') planted in front of my porch. I like to sit on the porch swing or glider and look out over these wonderful shrubs and see the gardens in the front yard. So every year, we trim them back with hedge clippers to keep them from getting too large. However, you can never cut the shrub back to the same size as you did the year before—each year, they get just a little bigger. So every five or six years, we take loppers and cut into some fairly sizeable wood to shorten the shrubs more drastically.

When we are done, there is not a leaf on these plants. One would think that we have really butchered them, but in a couple of weeks, new branches pop out from latent buds all over the plants, and they soon look great and flower well the following season.



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Shrubs that should be pruned back right after blooming include **Dwarf Korean Lilacs**, **Spiraea**, **Forsythia**, **Weigela**, **Viburnum** and **Ninebark**. Pruning back Viburnums will result in cutting off the part of the plants that will produce berries later in the season, so we try not to prune them often. As with all shrubs, it's best to plant a shrub to fit the space rather than constantly fighting to keep its size under control. As for Ninebark (*Physocarpus*), they can actually be pruned about any time. The foliage is generally more important than the flowers anyway, so we like to prune them to keep an attractive, fountain-like shape, cutting off any branching that sticks out down low.

**Tall Lilacs:** The old fashioned tall lilacs, also known as French hybrids, call for special treatment. Although they will grow back in a few years if you cut them to the ground, they can be kept looking good by simply cutting out the oldest, thickest stems, which can become quite large if left unpruned for many years. Cutting out these old, thick trunks will remove the tallest part of the shrub, but will leave the younger stems to grow and bloom the following years. You will need a chain saw or a slender pruning saw to handle these thicker trunks.

**Prune in early spring:** Some shrubs can, or should, be pruned early in spring. **Barberries** and **Burning Bushes**, neither of which have significant flowers, can be downsized early. And early spring is a good time to trim back **Shrub Roses**, which often have some dead branch tips that need cut back. Go ahead and cut back the whole plant to shape it up and keep it compact.

One shrub that *should be* cut back every spring is **Potentilla**. This wonderful small shrub will bloom all summer long, but if not trimmed back each spring, can become scraggly looking when it gets leggy. A good haircut in spring promotes more side growth, resulting in an attractive, compact plant.

**Hydrangeas:** Most Hydrangeas are best pruned in early spring. Please refer to my other pruning guide entitled Pruning Hydrangeas for a discussion on pruning the five different types of Hydrangeas.