

The Garden Tutors



GARDEN DESIGN & EDUCATION

5310 SAN FRANCISCO BLVD
SACRAMENTO, CA. 95820
PHONE 916.606.6029
THEGARDENTUTORS.COM

Preventing Horti-torture

The Problem:

As we walk around town, we keep hearing these small high pitched voices screaming in terror. Shrubs and trees are in constant fear of **Horti-torture**. People all over town are buying power hedge shears and hedging everything. It's a prime example of the "If I have a hammer everything is a nail" syndrome.

Horti-torture is pruning plants into weird shapes, pruning so much that there is no foliage left and pruning so you lose the blooms and the natural beauty.

Most cases of **Horti-torture** involve surface pruning. You do this by hedging everything so the surface becomes so dense that no light or air penetrate. You end with grotesque shapes that show no connection to the beauty you saw in the beginning!



The Solution: "Natural Pruning"

Lock up the power hedge shears and take them out *only* when pruning an actual hedge. Look at your shrubs and learn what they are supposed to look like. Is it bushy like Indian Hawthorn, arching like Abelia or a cane style growth like Nandina? Is it intended to be tall and upright or low and mounding? Is the branch structure important? Are flowers important?

A major part of being able to use "Natural Pruning" techniques depends on planting the right plant in the right spot. You can do "Natural Pruning" in most cases, but having plants that grow too large makes it much harder and more work.

In any case "Natural Pruning" means you want to prune to the inside of the plant, but, depending on the natural growth style, the actual technique is different.

Bushy plants:

Do you remember what your bushy shrubs looked like when they were young? They made a solid surface but still had some variation in the outline. They weren't so dense that no light went into the center. And they grew



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enough that the blooming varieties actually bloomed. Eventually they develop a permanent branch structure. When young, bushy shrubs need to be shaped to make them reasonably symmetrical and compact. With bushy plants you want to leave the permanent branch structure and do your pruning a few to several inches below the surface.

As the plant matures it becomes critical that this partial thinning process continue, leaving enough foliage at the surface to give some body to the plant, but still keeping the plant open to encourage growth from the inside.

Arching plants:

These are the plants that are naturally looser and generally arching in nature. New shoots often start from the ground. Typical examples of arching plants include Abelia, Loropetalum, Spirea and many Landscape roses. The primary difference from pruning bushy style plants is how far inside you prune.



Again, as with bushy plants, you leave the permanent branch structure and prune a few branches inside the plant and below the surface. Arching plants are pruned much deeper into the plant from half way to the base of the plant, to all the way to the base. Here you can remove branches all the way to or near the ground. This encourages vigorous new shoots that give more bloom.

In addition, a little surface pruning to give the plants a little more substance is sometimes necessary.

Cane or bamboo style plants:

Bamboo style plants have canes or branches that come from the base and generally are upright in growth. Bamboo, Nandina and Lady Palms are typical of this style.

Most of the time you prune canes almost to the ground to encourage new growth from the ground. In addition, you remove any branches that are sticking out to the side too far or are just too tall. When Nandina or Bamboo is hedged most of what you are doing is trimming parts of leaves.

Occasionally with Nandina pruning half way back to fill in the center is helpful. With true bamboo, aggressively thinning the plant and shortening canes to control size can be done. Usually shortening is done after the canes or culms get full size.



“Natural Pruning” does require a little more attention to what you are doing and it takes a little more time each time you prune. But, the pay back is in less frequent pruning, better growth, better bloom, and less disease. This, in addition to a better looking garden!

If you would like a training session call The Garden Tutors for a tutoring session.

