

Year Round Gardening

Late Winter Pruning, Summer Flowering Shrubs and Ornamental Grasses

By Fredricka Bogardus, Colorado Master Gardener

Toward the end of February is a great time to kick off the gardening season with some pruning and cleanup. Summer flowering shrubs are those shrubs which bloom after June 15, on new growth, as opposed to spring blooming shrubs which bloom on last year's wood. Since January and February have been so warm, it is important to get this task accomplished before these plants break dormancy. There are several approaches to pruning these summer bloomers.

Summer blooming shrubs include most butterfly bush, blue mist spirea, Hancock coralberry, mock orange, potentilla, bumald and Japanese spirea, hydrangea, rose of Sharon and snowberry. There are others so identify and research your shrub if you are unsure when it blooms.

Before you start pruning, look at the plant. Prune off any broken, damaged or diseased branches, and remove branches that rub against one another. Once the maintenance work is done decide on the pruning method you want to use for that shrub.

Rejuvenation pruning is cutting a shrub back almost to the ground to encourage a flush of new growth. Butterfly bush (*Buddleia davidii*) and Russian Sage (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*) should be annually pruned back to about 6" to increase the flower abundance and size. Other flowering shrubs may benefit from this severe pruning every 3 to 5 years. Some shrubs should never be pruned this way include; tree-like shrubs such as *Viburnum sp.*, *Euonymous sp.* and shrubby forms of *Rhamnus* (buckthorn), and any shrub that is grafted onto a different rootstock. If a shrub is really overgrown and very woody, rejuvenation pruning can be used to reduce the overall size of the shrub. On well-established shrubs, this is a 3- 4 year process, starting with a severe cut back, then annual thinning to reduce the number of new stems. The advantage to rejuvenating a large shrub over replacing it is that you retain the well-established root system which provides



'Butterfly Bush' living up to its name

drought tolerance and protection from seasonal, temperature fluctuations.

Thinning is a method of pruning which systematically removes old woody branches and encourages new growth. The approach is to remove 1/3 of the branches each year. Select the largest (oldest, woodiest branches) for pruning back to the ground each year. Every 3 year cycle will completely refresh the plant. New growth every year will supply new flowers. This methodology does not work well with plants such as *Spirea* or *Potentilla*.

Shaping is pruning to improve the appearance of the shrub, and to encourage improved light penetration and air flow through the plant. To shape remove portions of exterior branches to thin, layer, shape, balance weight and reduce size. Try to maintain a natural shape for the plant. When shrubs have reached the optimum size for their location, you may need to do a vegetative pruning every three to five years to maintain size and bloom.

I have not included shearing as a pruning method for flowering shrubs. Shearing seldom works well for flowering shrubs because it indiscriminately removes flower buds.

Ornamental grasses should also be cut back to ground in late winter. You can actually do this task anytime from late autumn until early spring. Many people do not cut grasses back in fall because they like the winter interest of the tall foliage and blooms. It is a good idea to get the job done early in the spring to encourage the new grass growth once it begins to warm up.

Spring will be upon us soon, and you will be glad you accomplished these chores when you start seeing that wonderful new growth and beautiful flowers.

For answers to urban horticultural questions, contact ask.extension.org. You can also follow the local Colorado Master Gardeners on www.facebook.com/ColoradoMasterGardeners.EPC/.