



PRUNING DESERT SHRUBS IN SOUTHERN NEVADA-TYPE CLIMATES

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Pruning is an important part of landscape maintenance. Pruning may be straightforward and quite simple. However, poor or incorrect pruning will often lead to serious problems, including premature death of the plant.

REASONS FOR PRUNING

TO:

- Maintain height and width
- Rejuvenate old shrubs

TO REMOVE:

- Damage from cold, heat and wind
- Unwanted sprouts

TO PROVIDE:

- Clearance for vehicles, pedestrians and windows

TO PROMOTE:

- New growth and better health
- Better flowering
- Less yard waste

TO IMPROVE:

- Landscape aesthetics



Figure 1. If done on a regular basis, most desert plants only take a few minutes to prune.



Figure 2. Overpruning creates large amounts of yard waste.

GOOD PRUNING BEGINS WITH CORRECT PLANT SELECTION AND PLACEMENT

Pruning Desert Shrubs

Pruning shrubs begins long before the clippers are taken out. It is important to choose the correct plant for the right place. Never plant a shrub, cactus or ornamental grass that reaches heights above what is desired at mature height. For example, if a 3-foot shrub is needed in front of a window, don’t plant one that reaches a height of 15 or 20 feet.

Poor pruning of shrubs can cause many problems in the landscape. Long-term pruning into balls and squares produces plants with very little green or live leaves on the outer extremities (Figure 3), while the interior consists mostly of dead leaves and twigs (Figure 4). This form of pruning also causes problems when drastic size reduction must be done. It exposes the old woody interior, and in some cases the shrub does not rejuvenate. It may take some time for this stark barren interior to be covered with new growth. Overpruning also creates unnecessary yard waste.



Figure 3. The outside looks green, but there are no green leaves inside to photosynthesize.



Figure 4. When shrubs are incorrectly pruned into balls and squares, live growth is left on the outer edges, and a barren interior is created.

New growth sprouts where the plant was cut (Figure 5). If a shrub is cut at the same spot over and over again, a live exterior and leafless interior will result. Correct pruning in a more natural manner is done by reaching into the plant's interior and pruning off the longest branches to bring the overall plant down to the desired height. New sprouts will form where the cuts are made.



Figure 5. New sprouts grow near or at the pruning cut.

Pruning into balls and squares can also cause poor plant health (Figures 6 and 7). Leaves produce food for the plant through the process of photosynthesis. The fewer leaves a plant has, the more it struggles to produce enough food to remain healthy. This type of pruning also eliminates flower buds. Many shrubs are planted for their beautiful flowers. Frequent shearing of shrubs in geometric shapes removes the majority of the potential flowers. Pruning shrubs into their natural, open shapes not only promotes health, but also produces a better display of flowers. This is especially true for some desert shrubs such as *Leucophyllum* (Texas ranger), which has a tendency to spontaneously burst into bloom during rain or high humidity.

Figure 6



Figure 7

Figures 6 and 7. Constantly pruning tips of the branches removes most of the leaves and many of the flower buds.

When the correct plants are chosen and planted the proper distance apart, less pruning is required and plants can grow more naturally. Many times, landscapers will plant closer than is necessary, not taking into account the plant's mature size (Figures 8 and 9). This is done for many reasons. More plants can be put, in which raises the price of the job, or an established look can be obtained more quickly. If shrubs reach a mature width of 3 feet, they should be planted 1 ½ to 2 feet apart (Figure 10). Many times plants that reach a mature width of 4 to 6 feet are planted 18 inches apart. This may sell more plants and quickly give the impression of an established landscape, but over the long term, it becomes a pruning nightmare. In the end, the solution is to remove a portion of the plant material or redo the entire landscape. Mulch with organic material and plant annuals until the shrubs fill in.



Figure 8



Figure 9

Figures 8 and 9. These shrubs are planted too close. They will fill in quickly, but will need to be pruned often. As they grow, half or more will need to be removed to make room.



Figure 10. These shrubs have been planted at the distance of their mature spread.



Figure 11. The *Leucophyllum* are pruned in a semi formal manner, creating a more manicured look and at the same time, leaving the flower buds.



Figure 12. This Texas ranger produces more flowers than over pruned shrubs because it is pruned open, allowing more green leaves and flower buds to grow.

Open and natural pruning can take on a semiformal effect as well as the more natural untamed look. Figure 11 shows formal-looking shrubs that have been pruned in a more open and natural way. Figure 12 shows a Texas ranger grown in a more natural way. Both are flowering shrubs covered in blooms. When the correct plants are chosen, pruning can be kept to a minimum. Three-year-old dwarf “Little Ollie” olive shrubs that have never been pruned fit nicely into their space (Figure 13). The rosemary in Figure 14 makes a beautiful single foundation plant over 10 feet wide. It has never been pruned and has been growing in this bed for eight years.



Figure 13. Three-year-old “Little Ollie” olive; never pruned.



Figure 14. Eight-year-old rosemary.



Figure 15. This hedge should have been pruned to the ground and allowed to regrow. It will need to be pruned every year to keep it in bounds.



Figure 17. *Leucophllum* resprout from the base, forming a new smaller plant.



Figure 16. The same hedge is shown here one year later

Retrofitting of Old Plantings

The Texas ranger in Figure 15 was hedged in this small planting bed for many years. The solution chosen was to shear it back in width and height, exposing the dead interior. Figure 16 shows the same hedge one year later. It is back to its original size, taking up too much room in the small planting bed. On close examination, one would see that this shrub was trying to tell the gardener that it would resprout from its trunk (Figure 17). The best solution for this plant would have been to prune it to the ground, leaving stumps only a few inches tall. Many gardeners are afraid to prune plants back so severely. Not all plants will resprout in the manner of this Texas ranger. If in doubt, try pruning one inconspicuously planted shrub in the landscape and see if it resprouts, or call your local county Extension office. A shrub pruned to the ground will regrow faster than a newly planted shrub from a container because it already has an established root system, which facilitates faster growth. This principle is illustrated by the regrowth of the oleander hedges shown in Figures 18, 19 and 20.



Figure 18. This very tall oleander hedge was pruned to the ground in March.



Figure 19. By June, it had resprouted.



Figure 20. By September, it was covering the wall again with beautiful blooms.

Landscape plants such as *Lantana* should be pruned back to the ground once a year. This should be done after all danger from frost has past, or the new growth may be killed (Figure 21).



Figure 21

Figure 21. These *Lantana* are pruned to the ground every year in the first part of March, after all danger of frost is past. By June, they have almost covered the bed and are blooming (Figure 22). By August, they are their original size, in full bloom, and have required no pruning during the growing season (Figure 23).



Figure 22



Figure 23

Larger-growing plants, such as this *Cordia* (Figures 24, 25 and 26), can grow too large for their planting space, so can be cut to the ground every two years.



Figure 24

Figures 24, 25 and 26. This *Cordia* hedge is cut to the ground every two to three years. Once or twice a year, it receives some selective maintenance pruning.



Figure 25

Figure 26



Figures 27 and 28. Choose plants so their natural beauty can be achieved with as little pruning as possible. The cascading rosemary on the left provides natural beauty with little or no pruning. The rosemary on the right is overpruned and requires more work.



Figure 27



Figure 28

When shrubs are sheared into formal shapes, such as balls and squares, they develop an old woody center with dead leaves and twigs. Such an interior is a potential fire hazard. When exposed to fire, it can combust easily, damaging plants in the landscape and possibly nearby buildings.



Figure 29



Figure 30

Figures 29 and 30. The interior of this rosemary hedge was full of dead leaves and twigs, unseen before it caught on fire. The fire burned hot enough to kill other nearby plants.

CONCLUSION

When creating a landscape, select shrubs that will fit the site when planted for years to come. This limits the amount of pruning that will ultimately be necessary. Avoid overwatering or overfertilizing. When pruning is unavoidable, use techniques that will maintain plant health. Incorrect and overpruning makes more work for the gardener, produces unhealthy plants, fills our landfills, and costs more to maintain.



Figure 31. These *Leucophyllum* look great and are blooming nicely. They have been growing for years in a vacant lot in Las Vegas, Nev., depending solely on rainfall (4 inches or less) for irrigation. They receive no fertilizer, pesticides or pruning.

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