

Hedging by Pruning

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1. This wax-myrtle hedge has lost its purpose! It doesn't screen the equipment behind it. There are three strikes against it: inappropriate shearing promotes legginess; wax-myrtle does better in sun not this shady spot; and it is short-lived when pruned hard.



2. This Australian brush cherry hedge has dead stubs as it has been sheared at the same height too long. It needs rejuvenation pruning to keep it full and healthy.



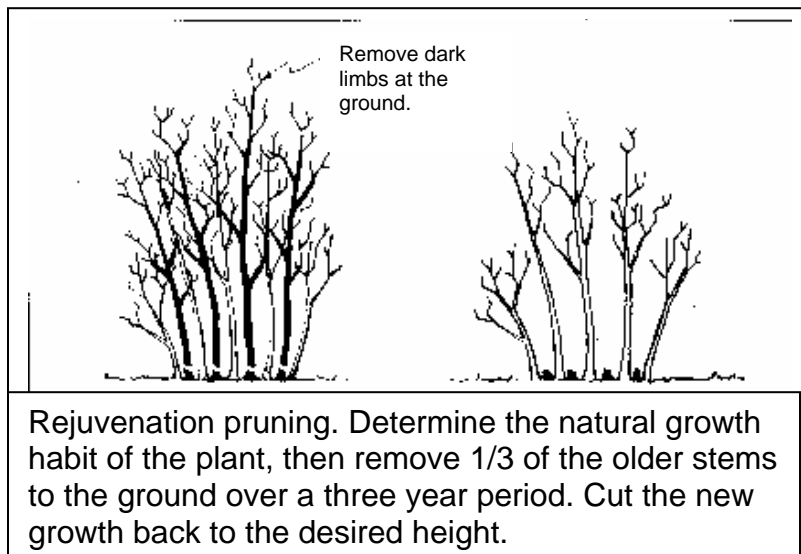
3. This 'Red Tip' dwarf coccoplum makes a three to four foot hedge that doesn't require much pruning.

Naples is a city of hedges. The horticulture books speak of various methods to keep a hedge within bounds. The most commonly used technique is power or gas shearing, the "go get-'em" approach versus the more delicate "pick and pluck" with hand pruners. The first technique is used commonly because it is a fast approach and provides a formal geometric ambiance. Hedges that are a half-mile long encircling golf courses and large condominium areas are tackled without a blink. These expansive hedges are a situation that calls for gas powered shears with the 5 foot cutting bar! This is the Edward Scissorhands technique to the max. However, this is an approach that looks better with smaller leafed shrub species such as: bougainvillea, ficus (weeping fig), crape-jasmine (pinwheel), downy jasmine (which doesn't do well when pruned), certain ixora, *Ilex* 'Schelling's Dwarf', plumbago, silverthorn elaeagnus, Spanish stopper, *Syzygium* brush cherry, and Walter viburnum, etc. Try to prune only the new tender growth.

When certain large leafed shrubs are power-sheared they often have the appearance of being attacked by a mulching mower. It doesn't present a nice finished look at the entryway!

With the pick and pluck approach, one typically follows where twigs are attached and a thought process is involved before the cut is made. Obviously this is labor intensive and, in essence, requires artistic expertise and a bigger budget. Many landscape contracts all for this approach with large leaf plants such as, croton, hibiscus, certain ixora, inkberry (*Scaevola plumieri*), Jamaican caper, Japanese pittosporum, oleander, scheffleras, seagrape, viburnum 'Awabuki', etc.

Often the hedge is kept at the same height. This often results in dieback of woody stems (see picture 2). Hedges should be sheared wider at the ground or base and tapered or narrower towards the top so that the lower branches aren't shaded and die (see picture 1).



Many older hedges benefit from a rejuvenation thinning. This involves a two or three year process to promote, ultimately, a denser, thicker hedge. About 1/3 of the branches are cut back all the way to the ground the first year. The second year, remove 1/2 of the remaining old stems and head back long new shoots due to last year's cuts. The third year, cut back the last old woody twigs and head back the long new shoots. Its best to do the severe pruning in early summer so that the new twigs won't be injured by potential January freezes. This technique will encourage new stems with multiple branches that will make for a fuller canopy.

Also, keep in mind that if you want flowers AND you want to keep a sheared hedge at a particular height that will require frequent pruning, you won't have many flowers, unless you pick and pluck prune. For long hedges, pick shrub species that you don't expect to see flowering impact. Use the flowering shrubs in locations where the new growth (and the flower buds) won't be sheared every month!



4. These oleanders were reduced in height by stubbing the large woody stems. These stems will decay and the structure of the shrubs will be weakened by the subsequent witch's-broom type of growth. A rejuvenation style type pruning would be a better approach.

Another technique that is used on hedges in Florida is called “stooling”. This is a severe cutting. Essentially, the hedge is cut to the ground or stubbed back to a severe degree. This looks pretty shocking, but in a few months the hedge will have flushed out full and green and with flowers (ixora and some hibiscus), just in time for the returning snowbirds, and no one would have guessed that it had been a bed of stubs two months earlier. This sort of “deep cutting” should be done judiciously and is better done periodically every two or three years on certain species. If the rejuvenation approach were used more often (specified in the maintenance contract instead of “pruning”), then the attractiveness of the landscape, and the longevity of the plant would not be compromised by the severe pruning shown in picture 4.

Landscape maintenance contracts should spell out the pruning techniques that will be used for the various hedges on the particular landscape.

For more see, Pruning Landscape Trees and Shrubs (U.F., Circular 853) at:
<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG087>

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