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News Release

## The when and how of pruning junipers

**Question:** We have some “Sea Green” junipers that had grown too large for the spot I planted them in about 10 years ago. I decided to cut them back from their six foot height to about a two foot height like I did my holly shrubs last year. My neighbor, who is a Master Gardener, says they won’t grow back like the holly. Before I tell my wife what I have done I thought I would see if my neighbor is correct.

**Answer:** I would suggest you invite your wife out for a nice meal at her favorite restaurant and slip the following comment in between the main course and dessert: “Honey, Joe next door said, I may have cut the junipers back a little too much but the plants needed to be replaced anyway, and the heavy pruning will make the plants safer to remove.” I don’t guarantee this will work but it’s worth a try.

Please pay attention to the rest of this article so that I don’t have to come up with clever ways of getting you out of trouble in the future. Since narrow-leaved evergreens like junipers produce new growth in spring and fall and do not grow much in summer, wait until late winter or early spring to prune. You may also do a little touch up pruning in the summer months.

In general, most narrow leaved evergreen trees and shrubs need little pruning and they should be pruned in a way that will maintain their natural form. This requires pruning individual stems rather than shearing. Always make your pruning cut to an upward growing side branch. We call this type cut a thinning cut which allows better light penetration but does not stimulate heavy branching. In contrast, shearing or heading cuts not only ruin the natural shape but also reduce good light penetration, resulting in excessive foliage drop, disease potential and dead zones in the center of the plant.

Remember, there are certain rules that apply to narrow-leaved evergreens that are quite different than other evergreens such as hollies. For instance, many broad leaved evergreens can tolerate severe renewal pruning, as you noted with your holly shrubs. Unfortunately for you, junipers and other narrow-leaved evergreens will not come back after this type pruning. If you must prune narrow-leaved evergreens you should start when they are small, usually the second year after they are planted. Pruning a little each year can keep the plants healthy and in the desired space for many more years than would be

the case if left unpruned. However, you can save yourself a lot of work and expense by spending a little extra time researching the mature size of the plant you have in mind.

In summary, the reason these plants can't be pruned heavily is because they lack dormant buds that other plants such as your hollies have in abundance. That is why it's hard to kill plants like privet or hollies by cutting them to the ground. They simply sprout back from the dormant buds.

On the plus side, for you, severely overgrown narrow-leafed evergreens should be removed and replaced with more appropriately sized plant materials. If you emphasize this point to your wife you may be able to come out smelling like a rose or at least like freshly cut junipers. Remember, if you are unsure about landscape maintenance questions call the toll free Master Gardener helpline at 877-ALA-GROW or you can reach Tony at the St. Clair County Extension office at (205) 338-9416 or email [gloveta@aces.edu](mailto:gloveta@aces.edu).