



Season 1 Episode 2—Pruning Basics

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Announcer

Welcome to the *Southern Ground* podcast provided by Alabama Extension through Auburn University. Extension educators Shane Harris and Dr. Chip East discuss seasonal lawn and garden topics, address common questions, and provide the practical solutions you want to know. Let's dig in to our *Southern Ground*.

Shane Harris

Hello everyone, and welcome to a, the second episode of our podcast, *Southern Ground*. Chip East and myself, Shane Harris, we're back with you to talk about some of those common questions that we get from horticulture home gardening standpoint. And so, it is now, uh, middle of January; its cold outside; there's not a lot of gardening going on, but Chip and I here are gonna talk to you about some of those common questions that we get. And one of those that we always get there in the wintertime, our number one call is pruning.

Chip East

Pruning is something people say, “do I have to do it?” Well, you don't have to. But to keep that plant in shape—and in some case we want it to produce either the flowers or fruit—pruning is beneficial.

Shane Harris

It's hard to describe that maybe doing a podcast. We, we've done these pruning workshops for over 20 something years, bringing people out to how to show them. So we're going to do our best to try to explain

pruning: when to prune, why to prune, how to prune. In some cases, you don't have to prune. My, my opinion is pruning sometimes overrated. Everybody thinks they've got to prune. Its January; I've got to prune. One reason to prune, a justifiable reason to prune, is to control the size to a certain extent.

Chip East

Absolutely. Someone can plant a beautiful plant. We love it. It's pretty. It's popular. It's wonderful. But we put it in the wrong place and now it over grows that site. I mean, unless we're going to move it, pruning is something we would do to maintain it. One reason to prune, Shane, is to remove or to correct a potential problem with the plant. We can have damage, decay, dead wood, deer can rub on a branch or the trunk of the tree. And sometimes we want to take any of that out. That's when the bark is scraped and any kind of damage.

Shane Harris

Dieback. You know, limb grown crooked all the time, rubbing against each other.

Chip East

Yeah. That bark is going to protect the inside, the woody part of that plant. And when that gets exposed, the woody part, we can. That's why a lot of trees are hollow. Because water gets inside there and the bark is going to help that when we have damage. I love to, if it's small and not a, you know, 80ft tall oak tree with, with branches 2 foot in diameter, I'd love to cut that out and let the new branch take that damaged branch place.

Shane Harris

And that's the second reason: to stimulate new growth. We can use pruning to our advantage. We always say pruning is, is correcting problems, but, especially when it comes to fruits, we're redirecting growth. We're making maybe an azalea bush a little more fuller. We can stimulate new growth in those problem areas or train new growth to grow the direction we want to.

Chip East

Absolutely. And when a branch is older, growth may slow down. In the case of blueberry, when, a cane, we call it, but that shoot gets 7 years old—it just depends on other factors and moisture and weed control and things—but let's just say a several years old, 7, 8 years old, the growth slows way down and if we don't have the new growth coming out of a shoot, we're not going to have the blooms and, therefore, berries. So, pruning stimulates flowers and fruiting.

Shane Harris

Chip, another reason to prune is to increase flower and fruit production.

Chip East

That's right, Shane, and plants bloom, they can bloom off of 1 year old growth. They can bloom off of current growth, depending on the plant, obviously. What if we have a shoot that's several years old? Older shoots does

not produce a lot of juvenile wood. New growth. And if we don't have the new growth, eventually it's going to affect our blooming, which if it's a case of a fruiting plant, it affects the, the fruiting.

And that leads us into another reason to prune: is to increase the air circulation and light penetration in a plant. And I really think about this when I think about fruiting plants, 'cause if we don't do any pruning, we can have fruit blooms and we'll have fruit, but they may be so far out of reach we can't pick the fruit.

And in the, it depends on the plant, but some of them we have disease issues with some plants, and air circulation is really helps any plant that may have more disease issues than others.

Shane Harris

And that leads us to the last reason to prune: is to control a plant size or form. Now, that's right plant, right place, wrong plant, wrong place. And pruning can be used as a crutch that we've got to bring this plant back down in size because we made a mistake and put it in the wrong place where it shouldn't be in, or it got bigger than it was supposed.

Chip East

Absolutely, Shane. And you know as well as I, people ask us—we're horticulturalist—they'll say, "Do you like this plant? Do you like." Well, I like a lot of plants, but the location some of these plants are in, I can't stand.

Shane Harris

That's right.

Chip East

And they have, they prune and it just hurts me when I see the shape of these. I know what it should look like or I would want it to look like. And yeah, think about that before planting.

Shane Harris

Now this is a, this is a horticulture pet peeve for us. And this is where we get into "crape murder." We get to hedges, we get to, I call it box and funny-looking shaped plants, to try to control size, because we're trying to bring a 25, 30-foot crape myrtle down to a 4-foot, 6-foot plant. And that's just, that's just that's not a reason to prune. We're ignoring what the mature size of the plant should be.

Chip East

We need to think about the growth habit of the plant and what we want it to look like 5 years from now.

Shane Harris

You know, we talk critical space and you think about how tall is going to be, how wide it's going to be. And a lot of these examples that we're saying we're pruning is too close to the house, close to, to a building. And we don't, we just don't realize how big is going to get.

Chip East

And it just goes into your landscape design, too. But if we have a plant, it's in that gallon pot or 3-gallon pot, whatever. We don't think about what it's going to look like a few years down the road, but that's what we've got to imagine when we plant something and so that we're not trying to prune so it'll fit it, we need to plant it in the beginning. And really, it'll eliminate some work, too. I mean, you do it yourself or you pay somebody to do it, but

Shane Harris

Yeah, pruning is labor. And that leads us into a topic of, or I guess a vocabulary word lesson for today. And when we prune, we're stimulating growth. Now realize that pruning leads to future labor. That's how I describe it to clients. When you prune, you're going to stimulate growth. And so, if you're controlling size, you're encouraging that growth to come back, sometimes two fold, three fold, tri fold, whatever. So, you're making lots more growth.

That's, that's the effect that we have when it comes to hedges. That's the results we have from crape murder. When you, when you even renewal pruning, as we've talked about a few minutes, you're stimulating growth. You're stimulating that you've got to do future pruning, additional pruning down the road.

Chip East

Yeah. And we just got to think about what we want it to look like. In the case of some, I'll just think about trees for instance, I might want a straight trunk. So, if I've got a tree with a forked tree, that's actually a...these narrow-crotch angles or one branch there, you have two central leaders in effect. And you have, they call it included bark or a bark inclusion.

And what happens is you'll see these split off all the time. If I could go back in time and cut that, one of those out when they're young and sometimes it wouldn't matter. I mean, usually I pick the straightest one, even if it's not the biggest one. That's a good reason to prune. You see, it eliminates work later on when this tree falls apart. And to me, it's there to be pretty and it's just not pretty with the double trunk. And it's certainly not pretty when half of it's on the ground in anything.

So, I think of another pruning, I look at pecan trees, for instance. It doesn't have to be pecan trees, but I see a lot of pecan trees in the fall of the year or late summer the new growth have short inner nodes. The inner node is the place between the buds. So, I've got a bud here, an inner node in a bud. And well we've got less growth. We've got a lot of buds around. And when the spring, we call that a crow's foot is the term that's given a lot. We'll have a lot of shoots coming off of those buds from the same point. Well, that's weak in that plant. And actually, branches can break because we have these...think of a pecan is that limb gets bigger. Big branches can fall off. So, what I do is I'm training a tree. I want a bud to grow in this direction. I want it to come up another shoot to grow to the left, one to the right, one to the north, south, east, west as it, rotates, goes up the plant, up the tree. I want these branches spaced in different directions. So, pruning is we're training a plant or a tree when we're pruning.

Shane Harris

Chip, the last part of this episode we want to talk about types of pruning. That's always a question. And it's very difficult to talk about this on a podcast. Because it's much easier to show you where to prune.

Chip East

Well, that's right. And we've got a lot of publications on this as well. But one of the types of pruning that we do quite often is a thinning cut. And a thinning cut is...there's different types of thinning cuts, but it's basically removing, we can remove the entire branch back to the trunk, or to the ground if you got a multitrunk plant, or we can just cut back to an outwardly growing branch. Cut one branch back to another branch that it's grown in the direction we want it to grow. That would be what I would consider a thinning cut, and that can promote more air circulation. Again, with a plant that needs, that has disease issues, sometimes I think air circulation is a big deal, and light penetration when we're wanting to ripen fruit.

Shane Harris

This is commonly done on ornamentals. Let's say you have an evergreen shrub—let's just use an example of an azalea or a Japanese cleyera—you've got this spindly growth that's come up that you want to bring it back, you're actually reaching into the canopy and hiding that cut and making a nice, beautiful shape and maintaining its form.

Chip East

And the other cut, Shane, is a heading cut. And a lot of times when people do...and a heading cut is just cutting at a random place on a plant for some reason. And usually that reason is because we desire more growth in that spot. If a plant is a spindly plant, Shane, and leggy, no branches at the bottom, but there at the top, we would go down and make a heading cut. Umm, it might be waist high. I don't know where, but that's where we want the branches to grow from. That's what a heading cut would do. Wherever we make the cut, that's where branches will start growing.

Shane Harris

And they do that commonly, especially on ornamentals, to make it, I mean, fuller.

Chip East

Absolutely.

Shane Harris

Thicker. You want that azalea to be more bushier and keep maintaining size. You would do that random heading cut.

Chip East

And again, if the cut is made where sunlight hits it, it's going to come back fast. If that cut is made in the shade, it's going to come back slow. And what I mean by that, if someone takes hedge and hedge clippers.

Shane Harris

Hedge shears.

Chip East

Hedge shears. And just takes a hedge and just knocked out so many inches off the shears, which is commonly done, it's fast and we can keep a box shape or some shape we're looking for. That's okay if that's what you're looking for. But all those cuts, every single one of those thousands of cuts are now in the sunlight, and they're going to come back fast, where some landscapers will say they don't do hedging, shearing, they will do hand pruning. And what that means is they'll take their hand pruners and go, if they've got a branch that's growing taller than they want it to be, they will grow inside the canopy and cut a branch, and then that's in the shade.

It won't come back as fast, so we don't have to prune as often. Obviously takes a lot more time to prune it that way, the whole plant, but you don't have to prune as often, and it's more of a natural looking shape, I think. But if you like that, I'll call it the hedge to look, if we're going to do that, that's fine. I will say I like a A-frame rather than a V frame. If, if the plant is bigger at the top than it is at the bottom, it's going to get you're going to show the stems, the trunk, the base of it. If you want it to be full from top to bottom, the base has got to be bigger than the top.

Shane Harris

Yeah. And the, the last cut, and we get this a lot too, is the plant has gotten too big. It's in front of a window, thinking about getting rid of it, but I still want to keep it. How can I reduce the size of this plant and still be satisfied with a nice shape, a nice size? And that's where we talk about renewal pruning.

Chip East

Yeah, and it depends on the plant. Renewal pruning, what that is, is I may take a chainsaw, but we're...and cutting a plant off very close to the ground and it'll start back overgrowing. If I was going to do that, I want to do that in the early spring. I'd rather not do it late in the year because we don't have time for it to regrow before frost and wintertime. So, I want to do that in the spring is when that's usually done. But when I cut, it'll start regrowing. All right. Plants have buds up under that bark that a lot of times we can't see. But they're there. Things that do not respond well to that type pruning would be boxwoods is high on my list and junipers. Sometimes we call it renewal pruning or in that case, severe renewal pruning. Sometimes it might be a thinning cut. I take a branch all the way back to the ground, might be a thinning cut, and it's a renewal pruning. But I'm not taking the whole plant back down. But normally we don't do that. If we keep up with our pruning, we might not have to. But if we go years without pruning, sometimes that's the very thing I'd rather do.

Shane Harris

And some essence is, going back to our reasons to prune, the plant has been damaged. Let's say it, it has some storm damage, it has some dieback. Maybe it's an older plant that just needs some reinvigoration. That's a good time to redo a renewal pruning, typically around March, early spring as Chip mentioned. If you do that then you

have a brand new plant, if the plant is still healthy, you got a good root system, you'll get a good flush of growth and a nice, nice, good shape plant.

Chip East

A lot of times, Shane, the plant will grow faster after that renewal pruning than it originally grew. Because, you said it, we have that root system that we didn't have 5 years ago like we do today. So, it grows back fast. And as it's growing fast, I don't want to wait once a year to come, if I need to shape that plant, I want to do that during the growing season and not wait and just try to prune once a year, or train once a year.

Shane Harris

Chip, we've done deep into pruning today for our second episode of Southern Ground. Folks, we've hope we've done a good job trying to clarify pruning: why to prune, have a reason to prune, where to prune, and some of the techniques of actually providing pruning tips. If you need more information, best to go to our website ACES dot E-D-U, spelled out A-C-E-S or contact your local Extension office for more information.

Uhh, it's such a, it's difficult to show you about how to prune. There's lots of videos out there. There's YouTube videos that Extension services nationwide have produced. Those are great resources. Also, try to catch us at a pruning workshop when we do this across the state to do some hands-on pruning demonstrations. Those are the best way to learn.

Chip East

Most people are scared to prune anything, so.

Shane Harris

Hey, they're very forgiving, aren't they?

Chip East

Absolutely.

Shane Harris

Bad pruning: they eventually recover and you may have to go back and, and, do some pruning later on to improve it. But hopefully we've given you a little bit of knowledge and, that you can go out there and try that.

Shane Harris

Hey, we want to, thanks for y'all for being part of this second episode of Southern Ground. This podcast is again here to answer some of those questions that we get on a daily basis as horticulturists. And we want to dig deeper into those topics on future episodes. Chip, happy New Year to, looking forward to doing future episodes with you on Southern Ground.

Chip East

You too, Shane. Thank you.

Announcer

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