



MISSION: BEAUTIFICATION ... CONSERVATION ... EDUCATION

## Planting and Growing with Challenges

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Landscape Design Issue: Suzanne Finger, Editor

Environmental Edition: May, August, November, February – Mary Lovings, Editor

Gardening Edition: June, September, December, March - Linda Doiron, Editor

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*Before you sign up for a spring water aerobics class at the Y, I'm talking about getting your plants in shape. As the warm breezes begin to blow, it is an excellent time to wrap up trimming and pruning in the garden before most plants put out a nice spring flush. In this edition of *Planting and Growing with Challenges*, let's discuss some of the basics of pruning and focus on a few common plants we like to keep in shape. So, sharpen up those loppers and hand shears, and let's "shape up!"*

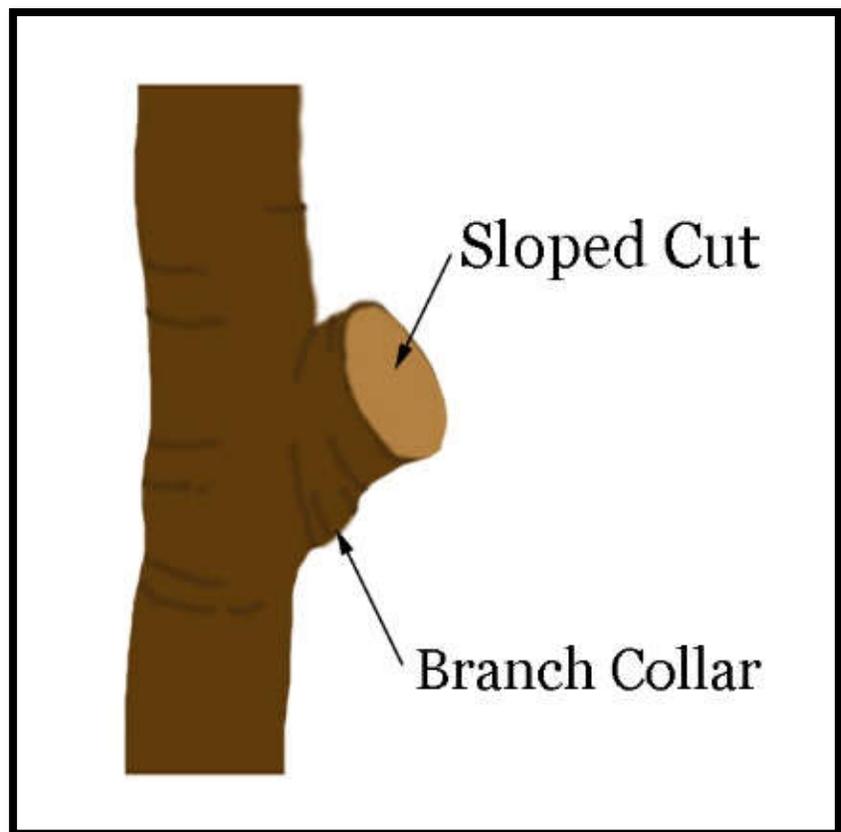
**A**s with any garden implement, you want to make sure your cutting tools are clean and oiled. Diseases are easily spread from plant to plant with a pair of dirty shears. A little Clorox water will do the trick, or something I've found helpful is to keep a canister of disinfecting wipes where you store your tools to wipe them down before and after trimming. After cleaning them, a quick wipe with a bit of oil is a good idea. The oil helps to protect the metal from rust and greases the moving parts. People use everything from boiled linseed oil to motor oil for this purpose. My favorite is a quick spray with PAM vegetable oil. (I keep a can next to the disinfectant wipes). A machinist might stick their nose up at my choice, but it is non-toxic and sure works for me! To save some wear and tear on your joints, it is also a great



idea to only purchase shears or loppers with a shock-absorbing pad that reduces the impact of the blades coming together.

Another helpful tip is to remember to keep your tools sharp. This applies to your hand tools just as it does to the blades on mowers and edgers. Sharp tools not only deliver a kinder cut to your plants, but they also take a little of the work out of the task. A clean cut is very important, especially for plants where mostly leaves (not the stems) are being cut. A dull blade can tear the leaf and create not only an ugly browning edge but provide more of an opportunity for pests and disease to enter the plant. This also proves true for mower blades and grass health. Electric or gas-powered shears are almost always guaranteed to tear the leaves of the plant you are cutting and are not the best choice.

**I**f the woody part of a shrub or tree needs to be pruned, it is very important (especially with trees) to remember to cut the limb or large branch at an angle. The angle allows water to shed from the surface and not pool on the cut, which could cause rot. Also, if a branch needs to be cut near the trunk of a tree, make sure the cut is not too close to the trunk. This way it is less likely to damage the trunk or branch collar. There are cells located within the branch collar that help the tree heal over a wound. Studies have shown that it is best to leave the wound to heal independently and not to paint or treat the cut area.



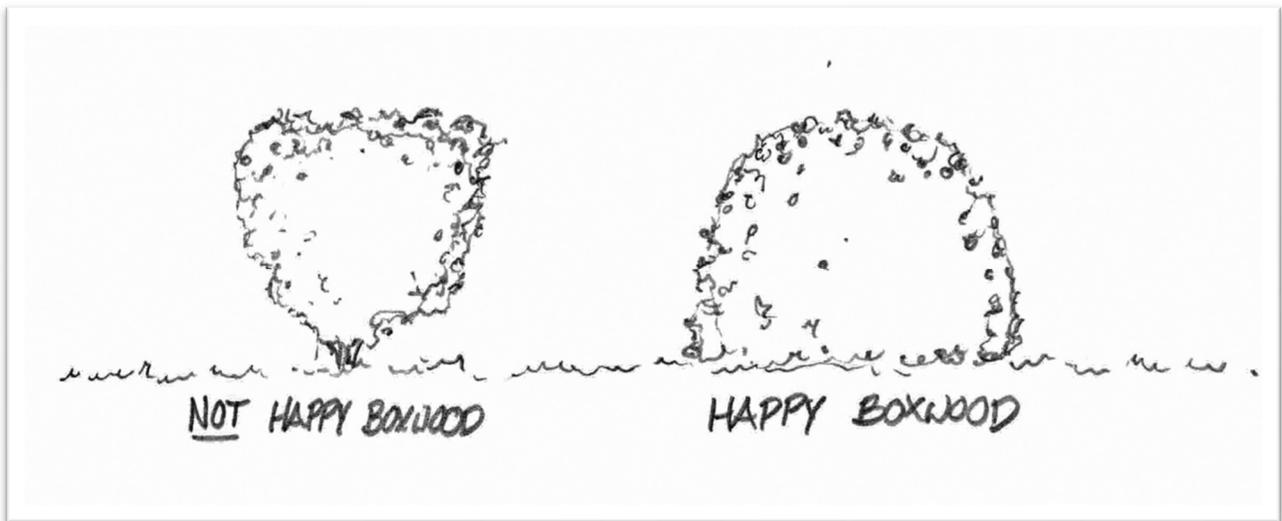
**B**oxwoods are usually the first plants thought of when someone mentions pruning. I have a theory that the same people who used to like to cut their dolls' hair are the same ones who like to trim boxwoods. There is something satisfying about trimming both to just the right shape. One critical difference is that boxwoods grow back after being sheared! The boxwood is almost like yard furniture in my book. It is something that can take



many different shapes and works well as an accent or functional piece. All of this is true because they are so easily shaped into the best shape for their assigned job.

Let's review a few rules of thumb in pruning techniques that apply to boxwoods and many other plants. The most important thing to remember when pruning boxwoods is to keep the bottom wider

than the top. (See diagram below) The shape really doesn't matter, it can be square, round, or in cloud-like form, but the top needs to stay narrower than the bottom of the shrub. Here's why: Pruning a shrub encourages new growth on a plant and most plants want to grow upward more than outward. Allowing the surface area of the top of the plant to get larger, speeds the growth of the plant and shades out the bottom areas. The lower parts do not get as much sun, rain, and air circulation which impedes their growth. The base of the plant begins to get leggy, and the plant develops a thicker, woody trunk. The correct pruning of a boxwood makes it look better, slows the growth, and lengthens the plant's life. This proves true of most plants used as hedges and foundation plantings such as loropetalum, azalea, shrub-form yaupon holly, Carissa holly, Indian hawthorn, viburnum and more.



Another thing to note about boxwoods is that they love to push out beautiful bright-green new growth after the first rainy warm spell. If they've just been trimmed, they put on even more of a show. In the event of a late freeze, the tender flush of new growth is susceptible to the freezing temperatures and can burn. It will not hurt an established plant; it will just turn the new growth an ugly brown that will need to be trimmed off again. So, make sure to time your boxwood trimming after what you think might be the last freeze. I come from a long line of South Georgia farmers, and most of them bank on another cold snap around Easter, so save your boxwood trimming until after the Easter Bunny has hopped away.

**I**f you must cut a crape myrtle, you must. I go into this in more detail in the July 2019 Landscape Design Newsletter if you would like to read into it a little further. For our purposes here, we will discuss the basics. There are three main reasons you would prune this southern treasure. The first reason is to promote blossoms, the second is to direct the shape or growth of the plant, and the third is to remove dead or diseased wood. Wherever you cut a crape myrtle, it will vigorously sprout from that location. Over time, this can create an unsightly knuckle. This is important to keep in mind when selecting where to cut the limb of a crape myrtle. If



you need to trim the whole tree, select locations on the branches at varying heights to help the tree keep a natural-looking shape. It is ok to trim out (and this is true for most small to medium trees) any branch that crosses toward the center of the tree and trim the suckers from the base.

**C**amellias do best when pruned during the cold weather. An old, misshapen camellia can be cut to about 18" from the ground, diminished to nothing but a stump, and come back with a beautiful flush of new growth in the spring. It presses the reset button, so to speak, on its overall shape and allows for it to grow into a nicer shaped shrub. So let the japonicas bloom, then trim them in late February or before it warms up in March. Your sasanquas can be trimmed around Christmas after their fall bloom, and the branches can make great evergreen stems for holiday arrangements!



**A**zaleas benefit from hand pruning to keep a softer shape. I usually think of the leaf size of a plant as a good guide as to how tight or loose to keep the shape of a plant. For instance, boxwood's tiny leaves allow for a very tight shape if desired, where azaleas' leaves are larger, and allow for a little softer approach to the overall shape. In general, the larger the leaf on the plant, the more open or "soft," its shape should be.

When pruning azaleas, select the branch that needs cutting and reach down into the canopy of the plant to prune it. Azaleas usually do better if their leaves are not cut or torn. Trim them by cutting the woody parts of the plant.

Well-established Formosan azaleas or southern indica hybrids can be nearly taken to the ground and sprout back as pretty as you please. I've decided that old, established formosans are indestructible. Don't tell anyone, but my grandmother once plowed a fire break around her formosan azaleas planted under her pines and burned them! They came back as full and gorgeous as ever! Maybe she was on to something. It has also been my experience that encore azaleas prune very well once established. Pruning can be accomplished by sharp hand pruners or even a car tire, (as were the fate of some at the end of my driveway). Karume hybrids seem to be a bit more finicky, and I would limit your pruning to about a third of the plant. Wait for the blooms to fade before going after your azaleas, not because you will hurt the plant, but you will miss the show. Most azaleas can be trimmed at any time of the year in the deep south. I hope this has inspired you to grease up your shears and shape up!

*All Photos were taken by Suzanne Finger unless otherwise noted*