

The Pruning Book by Lee Reich

Book Summary and Review

Book Summary

Part 1: The Basics (Chapters 1-3)

Chapter 1: Why Prune?

There are 4 main reasons for pruning: Plant health, plant size, beauty, and improving flowers, leaves or fruit.

1. Pruning promotes plant health by allowing more light and better air circulation to reach the plant. Pruning also removes diseased parts of the plant or parts that may become diseased like branches that are touching.
2. Pruning can be a method for keeping a plant from growing past a certain size. A plant will always try to grow to its natural size, but consistent pruning can prevent this. Bonsai is an extreme example of pruning to reduce size.
3. Pruning is often done for beauty. We can prune our plants to the shape and size we want. We can prune our plants in a way that looks beautiful with the other elements of their setting.
4. Another reason to prune is to improve the quality of flowers, leaves or fruits. Pruning helps to direct energy into the non pruned areas of the plant. This energy helps flowers, leaves or fruit to grow bigger or sweeter. In the case of fruit trees it can also help produce more consistent harvests. Often if a tree is allowed to produce all the fruit (non-pruned), it will produce less the next year.

Chapter 2: Tools of the Trade

It is important to use the right tool for the right size of pruning you are doing.

From smallest to largest the popular pruning tools are: Thumbnail, Pruning Knife, Hand Shears, Lopper, Saws.

A hand shears is one of the most important pruning tools to have. It is very versatile and can handle most of your pruning needs. A hand shears is good for wood up to 1/2 inch. Loppers are good for pruning up to 1.5 inches thick.

Above 1.5 inches, saws should be used. Bow saws, Narrow-bladed saws, pole saws and even chainsaws can be used for pruning larger branches. A narrow bladed saw is useful up to about 3 inches in diameter.

For pruning hedges quickly a manual or electric hedge trimmer is necessary. There are many other specialized pruning tools, but for the most part your pruning needs can be met by the above tools.

To keep your tools working well you need to clean them after use, sharpen them and store them in a clean dry environment. Sharpening your tools helps keep them working properly and make clean cuts. Clean cuts allow the plant to heal faster keeping it healthy. Sharp tools also are easier to use. Clean tools prevent the spread of disease from one plant to another.

Chapter 3: Plant Response to Pruning

Pruning always stunts or slows down the overall growth of plants. This can be one reason to prune, but there are other reasons to prune as well.

There are two types of cuts when pruning: a thinning cut and a heading cut.

1. A thinning cut is used to remove a branch or shoot completely. Thinning cuts are done right where the branch or shoot starts without leaving any buds. This is the cut to use if you just want to remove a branch to prevent crowding and allow sunlight and airflow.
2. A heading cut is when you shorten a branch by cutting off some portion of the branch, but not all of it. This is the cut to use if you want to stimulate growth along that branch. One example of a good time to use a heading cut would be when you buy a new fruit tree. Most of the growth is probably vertical, but by cutting back the top of the tree you can stimulate branching out horizontally off of the main shoot.

The time of year you prune can affect how the plant responds to pruning. Pruning when dormant (winter or late winter) is a good way to promote new growth. Summertime is a good time to prune away branches you don't want.

It is best to avoid pruning in late summer and fall because the cut will not heal till the next year when the plant begins to grow rapidly again. The exception to this is if you are pruning a damaged branch or one with disease. It's a good idea to prune these immediately when you see them.

You can prune other parts of your plant like flowers, fruits, roots, bark and leaves. Pruning flowers or fruit causes the remaining flowers and fruits to be bigger. Pruning roots is a good way to keep a plant small or to prepare a plant for transplanting the next year as it stimulates new root shoots. There are techniques for pruning bark that can

promote shoot growth or flowering but can also weaken the plant. Removing leaves can promote new growth below the area where the leaves are removed similar to a heading cut.

There are several ways to promote good wound healing when pruning. You should keep your tools clean and also disinfect them if pruning diseased material. When cutting back a stem you should cut just above the bud at an angle. If you leave much material above the bud it can die and be a pathway for disease to the plant. If you cut right at the bud the bud can dry out and die. The book also shows some diagrams on how to cut branches on a tree to prevent bark from ripping off and to make sure the cut heals properly. One tip is to cut a branch off just beyond the collar or area that bulges out before the branch attaches. There is no need to put anything on the cut after you make a cut. It's best to let the cut heal naturally.

Part 2: The Plants (Chapters 4-17) How to prune specific categories of plants

Chapter 4: Deciduous Ornamental Bushes

Don't prune bushes till they get older (the same as fruiting bushes). Prune some of the oldest growth to the ground each year. The more new shoots a bush puts up each year the more of the older ones you should prune back. Prune shoots that curve toward the ground and woody stems in the middle of the bush as need to create space. The best time to prune these bushes depends on when they flower. For early flowering bushes, prune right after the blossoms are finished. For summer or later flowering bushes prune just before new growth starts.

Chapter 5: Deciduous Ornamental Trees

The best time to prune deciduous ornamental trees is late winter or in the spring before the tree starts to grow. The tree shape can range from round-headed to spirelike. It is usually a good idea to work with the natural shape of the tree.

Keep the following things in mind when pruning ornamental trees. In most cases only allow one shoot to become the trunk. You don't want competing trunks. Select your main branches with spacing of 1 - 2 feet apart on the trunk. The height of these branches at the trunk will never change. When the tree is young prune it as little as possible so it can grow quickly and survive. You should focus on thinning cuts especially towards the top of the tree as this allows light and air into the tree to keep the tree healthy.

Chapter 6: Evergreen Trees and Bushes

The most important thing I learned in this chapter was that evergreens don't need much pruning. It's best to pick out a tree that you want for a space and allow it's natural shape to form. You should maintain a central leader or trunk that is dominant just as in other pruning. If you want to keep an evergreen smaller prune it right before it starts growing. To make it denser cut or pinch off the tips or new growth in the spring.

Chapter 7: Ornamental Vines

Ornamental vines share a lot of similarities with fruiting vines. A lot of the pruning concepts are shared. For example you can cut back the vine aggressively and still expect new and fast growth. For ornamental vines it is best to prune early flowering types right after the flowers are finished. For vines that flower later (summer and beyond), prune just before new growth starts.

Chapter 8: Edible Fruits and Nuts

The purpose of pruning fruiting plants is to have a healthy plant which can produce fruit and then to direct energy to the fruit. Prune to prevent plants from shading themselves, this allows them to get the maximum amount of sunlight. This also helps keep good airflow to prevent disease.

The basics of pruning for fruit are as follows: Prune when the plant is dormant. Minimize pruning of young trees to what is needed to prevent delay of fruiting. Choose branches to keep off the main trunk between 6 and 18 inches apart. If planting a fruit tree with a single stem cut the stem back to 2-3 feet high. This stimulates branches to grow which you can then select. Pruning of young fruiting bushes (like blueberries) should be minimized, till they are several years old, then remove older wood and then young wood. For vining fruits cut down to several buds when planting to stimulate growth

When pruning a young fruit tree, you should focus on providing a structure that is strong to provide a good base for future growth of the tree. There are 3 main types of forms you can prune your fruit trees into: Central leader, Open center, modified central leader (I would suggest googling these terms so you can see examples of these types). Choose an appropriate type for your goals and your specific type of tree. Begin to select branches the first year you grow a tree. Each technique is different, but it is important to space branches 6 to 18 inches off the main trunk. For young trees it is also important to focus energy on growth rather than fruit. Also remove excess branches and watersprouts (shoot that grow quickly vertically). To get your tree ready to fruit as soon as possible try to minimize pruning to what is necessary.

When pruning an older fruit tree you should prune to allow airflow and sunlight. Usually you should do the pruning when the tree is dormant. One method I found interesting, was to use primarily thinning cuts towards the top of the tree and use heading cuts on lower branches. This promotes good structure of the tree so that it is smaller at the top than the bottom. Older trees are at fruit bearing age so you should try to prune branches and fruit to direct energy into the remaining fruits. This also prevents too much fruit one year and then hardly any the next. Thin fruit when it is small and young to get the most benefit.

When pruning a neglected old fruit tree you should usually do this over several years so you don't weaken the tree too much.

There are two ways to renovate a neglected fruit bush: First you can cut the bush down to around ground level and the bush will spring back. You will lose a year of fruiting. Alternatively, you can gradually renovate a bush by thinning out some of the oldest stems and some of the newest stems down to ground level each year when it is dormant.

Fruiting vines can be pruned back dramatically and recover very well. If you have an old fruiting vine that needs renovation, you can prune everything off the main trunk or cut it back to the ground and it will usually grow back very vigorously.

The rest of this chapter focus on each specific type of plant and it's unique needs for pruning. Very helpful and includes a long list of plants.

Chapter 9: House Plants

Houseplants should be pruned with the same methods as non-house plants. However, you will need to prune more aggressively to keep the plants from growing too big. The other consideration for house plants is root pruning. Because these plants are in containers they will occasionally need their roots pruned. If you pull the plant and root ball out of the container you can check to see if the roots are circling the pot or look as if they need more space. If necessary you can prune the roots, then put the plant back in the pot and replace any soil that is needed to fill up the remaining space from pruning the roots.

Chapter 10: Herbaceous Plants

Herbaceous Plants don't generally need any pruning as leaves that are removed make the plant grow slower. There are a couple reasons to prune herbaceous plants. One reason is to promote more side growth to make the plant more bushy. You can do this by pinching off the tip of an herbaceous plant. Alternatively you could pinch off all side shoots to direct more energy into 1 growing point to create a larger flower or fruit (i.e. suckering tomatoes). Another technique is deadheading which means removing dead or dying flower blooms that are not attractive. This helps the plant put energy into other areas of the plant as well. Crown division is another technique you can use for herbaceous plants that clump. In spring when a perennial begins to come up you can dig up the plant and use a shovel to divide a part of the clump and then replant. It is best to plant the part of the clump toward the outside of the main clump as this is the newest growth.

Part 3: Chapters 11-17 Specialized Pruning Techniques

These chapters focus on specialized pruning techniques like Pollarding, Pleaching, Topiary, Standards, Mowing, Bonsai and Espalier. It is difficult to summarize these specialized techniques, but Lee Reich does a good job of explaining them.

Book Review

I enjoyed this book and it was very helpful for understanding why to prune and how to do it. Part 1 was the most helpful to me as it went over the basic principles of pruning which tend to apply to all the future chapters. I thought the concepts were explained very well despite the fact that these concepts can be difficult to explain in written form. There are good diagrams of many of the important concepts.

I would suggest that this book not be read cover to cover. I would recommend carefully reading Part 1 (Chapters 1-3). After understanding the basic principles of pruning I would recommend moving on to Part 2 and picking out the plants you want to learn about and then reading those specific sections. There is a lot of redundancy in each section of Part 2 as many of the pruning principles apply to each type of plant. It seems as if this section was written so that the reader would pick out the parts relevant to what they want to prune. I would even recommend reading the relevant section just prior to when you are going to be pruning that specific type of plant. That is what I did and I think I will learn more because of it.

Part 3 covers some specialized pruning techniques which likely will not all apply to many readers, but are definitely interesting. I'd recommend at least skimming this section to get an understanding of the specialized techniques that are available.

Overall the book was very helpful to understand pruning. I think I will need to put it into action, in order to totally understand the principles. I certainly will be less intimidated by pruning jobs now that I understand the basic principles. Understanding the reasons behind why different pruning techniques are done, allows me to now start a pruning job with confidence.

This is the only book I have read on pruning, but it is hard to imagine how it could be significantly improved upon.

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