

Pruning Broadleaf Evergreens

They're easy. But they're not all the same!

The days of shearing everything into balls, boxes, points and light bulbs are over. And good riddance! Continuous hard pruning encourages diseases and pests, and brings eventual decline to plant health. If you find yourself pruning the same bush year after year because it is growing too large, transplant it to a location where it can fulfill its natural habit and replace it with something that better fits the spot. And finally, good pruning is about timing. Here's how to handle pruning of the most popular broadleaf evergreens.

Buxus (Boxwood)

Boxwoods are best shaped up at the very end of winter, just prior to new growth, then let be. As most are slow growing and slow in response to pruning, shearing later in the season can bring the plant into winter looking scalped, or with soft new growth that gets "burned" by winter's dry, icy winds. If your plants are old and have bare spots, clip the dead out. By opening up light, there's a chance that healthy surrounding branches may re-sprout and eventually fill in the void.

Euonymus

Evergreen Euonymus are best shaped up at the very end of winter, just prior to new growth, then let be. If early summer growth is rampant, they can be lightly touched up in summer but preferably by 4th of July. Hard summer pruning, or late summer pruning leave plants with an ugly, unnatural, scalped look.

Ilex - Evergreen Hollies With Colorful Berries

There is no foolproof way to prune these without sacrificing at least some of the fruiting. These flower and fruit on the plant's old wood; that is, the bud-set was made in the previous year. That said, the best way to approach pruning is to do a little each year to maintain shape and size. Remove the tips or small portions of the most vigorous branches annually. Likely, you will cut off some fruit or future flower buds, but by doing so conservatively, most buds and fruit will remain intact.

Ilex - Almost All Other Evergreen Hollies

Of the remainder of hollies, some set fruit however they are blackish fruits that are usually not of importance to the home gardener. These plants are mostly prized for their ability to cover ground, fill borders and create green screens. They are best shaped up at the very end of winter, just prior to new growth, then let be. This lends them a compact and controlled yet natural look. If absolutely necessary, they can be lightly touched up in summer but never after the 4th of July. Hard summer pruning, or late summer pruning leaves plants with an ugly, unnatural, scalped look.

Nandina (Heavenly Bamboo)

Nandinas, once fully grown in the landscape, look best when pruning is done "stair-step". Stair-step is a technique that keeps the plant in check while allowing a natural look and a berry set. In winter, seek out the oldest third of the stalks and cut them hard, practically back to the ground. Then, take another third of the branches and cut them back about half way. Take remaining third and cut them back just a bit.

Pyracantha (Firethorn)

See "Evergreen Hollies With Colorful Berries" (above). Pyracantha are treated exactly the same.

HAT-RACKING OF BROADLEAF EVERGREENS

If there comes the need to drastically reduce the size of your evergreen, then a method called "hat-racking" is recommended. This is only done successfully at the very end of winter, just prior to the burst of spring growth. Cut all branches back by whatever is needed, even by ½ to ¾ of their original length. Then expect to wait up to two years for recovery and a complete return to full leaf coverage and fruiting. Again, timing is critical with hat-racking: done any other time of year, this method can kill an evergreen.
