

Alison Böckh

GARDEN DESIGN



www.gardendesignernorthdevon.co.uk e:alison@gardendesignernorthdevon.co.uk
t : 01805 804322 m : 07772147518



THE NEWSLETTER

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To prune or not to prune?

Or rather how to prune and when...

I may have mentioned my love of Hebes before; having brought home four tiny specimens in 9cm pots about 12 years ago they started to resemble something out of a 1950s sci-fi film and were on a mission to take over the world. They practically reached my back door anyway.

Fortunately a pair of loppers was sufficient to save humanity and they now look like this:



I admit I am experimenting and hope they will renew themselves to more sociable proportions. Which brings me to this month's post...

Often I'm asked to visit a garden that's 'got out of hand' and needs a bit of an overhaul.

"But we've hacked everything back ..." says the new owners – as if this was a good start. Images of Amazonian scale deforestation arise menacingly in my mind and I wonder what horticultural gems have been destroyed in the process.

Shrubs left to their own devices do not observe the restrictive boundaries of our limited gardens and there inevitably comes a point when some judicious pruning is needed to restrict their size. However this is not the only reason to prune.

Stop a moment before you plunge in with the machete and loppers and consider what the shrub was planted for and why is it being grown in the first place. Even if the previous owners planted it they had their reasons – was it to screen an ugly view, for its flowers, its fruit, its autumn colour, all of the above; is it evergreen or deciduous? Answering those questions is more important than knowing precisely what it is – although that helps. (There might be a faded plant label hiding in its midst.)

I'm restricting this month's newsletter to spring pruning of shrubs before growth get too far advanced.

The first rule of pruning anything is the 3Ds – cut out any stem that is dead, diseased or damaged.

Next – consider its purpose as far as you're concerned; deciduous shrubs grown for their coloured leaves like Cotinus or their coloured winter stems like Cornus can be pruned hard. This means cutting down to the lowest buds on each stem – new stems will grow throughout the summer providing showy leaves or bright stems for the following winter. In successive years cut down to lowest buds on the previous season's growth.

Similarly with buddleia, last year's growth can be cut to the lowest buds on each stem controlling its size (it can be a bit of a thug) and producing a fresh crop of new stems and abundant flowers – not to mention visiting butterflies.

Many summer flowering shrubs flower on last season's growth so not so trigger happy with the secateurs just yet – but I'll get back to you on that in July.

Evergreens

With evergreens their function in the garden is to provide structure throughout the year and often for screening. Being lightly pruned regularly in spring will keep them bushy and compact improving the shrub's shape and generally controlling its size. Cutting back with a

good pair of secateurs to a well-placed shoot on a main stem will encourage new growth with plenty of time over summer to harden up before winter.

With smaller bushy shrubs like lavender a good hair cut with the shears wakes them up, removing faded flowers and the tips of new growth. Other silver leaved and Mediterranean shrubs can be trimmed with the shears or secateurs at this time – Santolina, Helichrysum,



Rosemary. Senecios and sage can have their tips pruned out to keep them bushy and compact.

Occasionally – or if you’ve taken on a ‘mature garden’ (i.e. neglected jungle) – drastic renovation maybe called for. It can seem brutal and there may be casualties but I’m always amazed at the recuperative powers of nature. Witness the devastation committed on our hedgerows every year by the tractor and flail – yet by summer they are renewed.

In the garden however a good sharp pruning saw is often sufficient. Evergreen shrubs such as Rhododendrons, Cherry Laurels and Elaeagnus can all achieve Tryffid-like pretensions and need putting in their place.

Cutting the main stems down to within one or two feet of the base will encourage new fresh stems which can easily be controlled. No random ‘hacking back’ you notice. What is cruel, having been so strict, is to forget to give them a good feed and water; a few handfuls of blood fish and bone sprinkled round the base and watered in will be appreciated, as will a good mulch of compost or manure.

Deciduous shrubs however, should only suffer such renovation in the winter when they are dormant.

If you’re really stumped (no pun intended) look no further the RHS encyclopaedia series book called ‘Pruning’ no less, by Christopher Brickell. RHS Garden Rosemoor will certainly be able to supply you from their excellent garden bookshop or try getting a copy on Amazon. A bargain at around a tenner with clear idiot proof drawings. I wouldn’t be without it.

And if you want some hands on advice – just give me a call.

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tel. 01805 804322 Mob. 07772147518