

Pruning Gone Wrong



the sassy gardener
BY LEANN LOCHER

We've all seen them. The overly manscaped, the bad mullet-inspired haircut and the self-inflicted trim of the bangs that ended up way, way, way too short—not that I'm speaking from experience or anything. Just as with human trimming, pruning of plants can go wrong quickly if you let it.

I have a knack for spotting horrific pruning jobs, whether it be lollipop bushes lined up in front, overly sheared evergreens obviously destined for death or topping of trees. Yes, topping of trees. I don't think anything gets my goat like seeing a beautiful tree topped. So let's start there.

One of my favorite horticultural organizations is Plant Amnesty (plantamnesty.org), whose mission is to end the senseless torture and mutilation of trees and shrubs. They list five reasons to stop topping trees, and they're good ones:

It won't work. Topping actually makes trees grow back more.

It's expensive. Once you've topped a tree, there's no going back. It will need to be done every year or two.

It's ugly. Enough said.

It's dangerous. Topping a tree stresses it, making it more prone to rot, weak limbs and increased potential for being blown over by wind.



Step away from your pruning and make sure you're getting the look you want. A giant bush in the shape of a butt may not be what you're hoping for.

It makes you look bad. Yes, they really do list this. I love Plant Amnesty.

Lesson? If you have a good-sized tree, bring in a professional. If you are growing trees, read up on when and how to prune for the kind of tree you're growing.

Now onto shrubs gone bad. In my early days of gardening, I committed some horrific acts of pruning. I got caught up in all of that vigorous cutting and chopping, much like the channeling of Edward Scissorhands, but then I came to my senses and awoke to reality. Paus-

ing for a moment in the frenzy, I stood back and saw the atrocity. I had pruned an evergreen directly outside of the window, cutting away all of the outer green growth and exposing the dead, brown underside. Sure, the new view from inside had more daylight, but it also featured a bird's eye view into what appeared to be a dead plant. *Fail.*

I've learned a lot since that episode, but one of the most helpful things I've realized is that pruning is counterintuitive. You don't prune in spring to control growth. Pruning now will encourage growth because wherever you make a cut, new growth will spring forth, two and three fold. And pruning an ancient evergreen down to the nubbins will not spring forth a lush, spry plant.

In the words of Kenny Rogers, *You've got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em / Know when to walk away, know when to run / Know when it's time to prune, know when you need to admit poor plant choice.* Okay, that last sentence wasn't part of Kenny's lyrics, but it's true. A plant too large for the space it's in will most likely not look lovely overly pruned. Get rid of it and grow plants appropriate for the



Never. Ever. Never do this.

space they're in.

Different pruning is required for different plants: Plants that flower on new wood can be pruned in early spring, because the new growth will bloom. However, pruning hard on plants that bloom on year-old wood will not.

Step away from the pruning as you go. Look at what you're doing and where you're cutting. Take a break and come back—or else you might end up with a giant bush in the shape of a butt. Then again, maybe that's the look you're going for? ☺

LEANN LOCHER prunes with restraint these days. She can be found in her North Portland garden and online at lelonopo.com.

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