

Mid January 2025 Winter pruning

January and February are the best times to prune woody plants because they are dormant as are pests that might infect them. Look at the plants in your yard, are there branches that interfere with mowing or walking? Are there dead branches that might fall and do damage? Is some of last years growth unsightly? Do not prune spring flowering shrubs like forsythia, flowering quince, lilac, etc if you want flowers in the spring, they have already set their flower buds; prune after flowering.

Evergreen shrubs like yew should be pruned now of the growth they put on over the summer, if you want to keep them a certain size. If you have planted new trees in the past few years now is a good time to evaluate their growth. Look at the branches, any growing vertically and competing with the main central stem should be removed, if you want to be able to mow or walk under the tree eventually, begin the removal of lower branches (not too many). Check that branches are not crossed or rubbing against each other, remove any dead branches. Look at the overall appearance of the tree, if there are too many branches clustered on one side cut a few to promote better air circulation. Protect young trees from bark eaters (rabbits, mice), bark shredders (bucks rubbing off velvet), and stem tip eaters (deer).

Every year you read about my ongoing battle with the pear tree. Fruit trees may need a serious pruning of water sprouts which are vertical, unbranched stems that have grown in the last year. Water sprouts will not produce flowers this year, but if left untrimmed will form a dense growth on the top of the tree. The tree looks like it had a crew cut with all the water sprouts sticking up and it is some job cutting most of them off. I use hand pruners, loppers, and a hand saw and slowly work my way around the tree. The water sprouts are saved for other uses, tied together they make nice teepees for peas and beans and other long stems that need to be controlled. I want the pears to be reachable and so do other pruning to keep branches accessible.

An update on the peach tree: last year bucks shredded most of the bark of the peach tree, leaving only a small strip. To persuade the tree to put its energy into staying alive instead of growing peaches, branches were severely pruned and the few flower clusters removed. It survived the summer. It will be checked now, pruned to encourage survival and its trunk protected. The plum tree has never flowered so it will be threatened and pruned. Threatening plants frequently works, if they know their future is in doubt they often do what they are supposed to do.

Removing unwanted woody plants can be done even if you don't know what they are. Oaks planted by squirrels, tree seeds germinating, stems emerging from parent plants (burning bush, wild plum, etc), anything that is not what you want where you want it can be cut off at ground level. Lots to do outside if the weather cooperates, otherwise, read a book, bake, do some crafts and enjoy the winter outside while you are snug inside.