

Sources for Information on Proper Landscape Maintenance

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2 examples of a *Leucophyllum laevigatum* - on its own in an informal setting, and as a group in a formal setting - which would you prefer?



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Proper Maintenance Procedures



Sheared Texas Sage

It appears that pruning in the landscape, especially for drought tolerant plants, has become somewhat controversial. In virtually every community it seems that the methods for pruning trees, shrubs, and even groundcovers, are often ridiculed. Frequently bullet-proof plants like Texas Sage and Cassia are sheared to produce a variety of geometric shapes like balls, boxes and columns. Some may consider this to be a form of topiary, but when plants native to the southwest lose their natural shape, they also lose something more than their dignity.

Shearing water conserving plants produces vigorous new growth at the branch tips. This creates a “shell” of foliage and a hollow inside. This is the natural

plant response to this type of pruning. The abundance of foliage is often greater than what would normally occur on a plant left in its natural form. It stands to reason that plants with more leaves transpire larger amounts of water and therefore become less water efficient. Dr. Chris Martin, Urban Horticulturist with Arizona State University, indicates that frequent pruning weakens a plant by reducing the capacity to produce carbohydrates and to take up water and nutrients. He likens the practice to placing a plant on a crash diet.

Sadly, another side-effect of shearing is the loss of flowers. Many of the plants that we know and love produce flowers on the previous year's growth. Shearing destroys the natural flowering cycle. As a result we see minimal floral displays especially on Texas Sage and similar species. So why is it that we continue to see this pruning style practiced? In many situations the site is too crowded with plants and the pruning is well-intended to maintain adequate distance between the shrubs. Designers should layout plant materials with mature sizes in mind. Perhaps we see the novelty shapes because some people like topiary. If so, maybe they could fashion something really creative, like circus animals or more exotic designs. Others say the shearing occurs because the volume of pruning justifies the continued existence of the maintenance company. Power hedge-trimmers make

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the unknowledgeable dangerous. Whatever the reason, supervisors should put away those shears and not allow them on the truck. In all fairness to plants we should issue only hand pruners. Let's look at a few alternatives to shearing on the previously mentioned species. Often shrubs like Texas Sage can become quite large unless they are selected cultivars produced for their reduced size. In fact, allowed to retain their natural shape and form, the species could achieve 12 feet or more. This is a bit out of scale for most landscapes, especially residential layouts. Instead of shearing into geometric shapes, consider one of the following: **The Three-Year Pruning Method** or **The Two-Step Naturalistic Approach**.

In the **Three-Year Pruning Method** remove one-third of the largest branches down to ground level each year. Of course the pruning should be done at the appropriate time of the year to allow for flowering and to remove the largest amount of messy fruit. Repeat this process the following year by removing one-third of the largest stems. By the end of the cycle the shrub will have been completely rejuvenated with no wood remaining over three years old. The newest foliage produced hides the previous cuts in each step of the process and the result is a very informal look.

The **Two-Step Naturalistic Approach** was introduced by the late Eric Johnson, famed designer and horticulturist of the Southwest, in his book *Pruning, Planting & Care*. He recommended pruning the outer canopy of the shrub to create a roughly rounded shape. Much like shearing, the size is reduced by perhaps one-third.



Step One: Use hand pruners to cut back branches and stems creating a rough globe shape.

Step Two: Cut every other branch back to the first large "V." Vary length of cuts randomly from 6 to 9 inches long.

Reprinted with permission from *Pruning, Planting and Care* by Eric Johnson, Ironwood Press.

do you do with a landscape that has been sheared into all sorts of poodled shapes? **Restorative Pruning!** In this procedure the shrub is reduced in size by pruning very hard, to near ground level. The shrub will generate a flush of new shoots on the remaining stubs, much like the cuts that produce new shoots at the branch tips. The resultant growth is glorious, fresh and new. The massive root system is quite capable of producing lots of water and nutrients for the revived shrub. Over the next few months the shrub can be nipped here and there to keep the general shape intact.

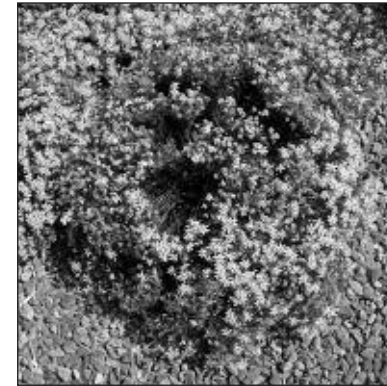
Restorative Pruning works well on just about every shrub except junipers and rosemary. Try it on sages, indigo bushes, and fairy dusters. Don't mind the bare stubs left behind. If pruned at the onset of new growth the plant will bounce back rapidly. This method can be employed on shrubs that are damaged by cold or insects too. For example, the Yellow Bird of Paradise, *Caesalpinia gilliesii*, is often trimmed into a small tree. They look like storks with skinny little legs. When trimmed up this way the older wood is prone to sun scald, which invites infestation by wood boring beetles resulting in considerable limb die-back. By pruning hard every second or third year, the shrub produces vigorous new growth that is not favored by the insects.



Jojoba Hedge

Once completed, every other branch is then cut back to the first "V" crotch in the interior of the shrub. By varying the cuts randomly, the overall appearance is very natural looking. Both of the described methods may be used for creosote bush, Texas Sage, Cassia and similar species.

Often people ask what should be done if you take over a project that has been neglected with little or no pruning. Or worse yet, what



Damianita: Foliage Splitting Open Prior to Pruning



Post-Pruning



1 Month Later



Over Pruned Desert Spoon

Occasionally situations occur where certain plants are not pruned but would greatly benefit from some trimming. Take *Chrysactinia mexicana* for example. Often called Damianita, this wonderful little plant is often allowed to bloom repeatedly without any pruning. This is a plant that responds well to shearing. After the heaviest spring bloom it should be cut lightly to remove the spent blossoms and keep the foliage tight. If neglected, the small shrub will split open to present an unsightly view of the interior stems. Older plants start to look really rough after a few years and this is when the landscape manager yanks them out. Sadly, these plants only required a quick trim with the shears.

Flowering can be revitalized by simply removing the spent flower blossoms on a number of plants. Known as "dead-heading", Angelita Daisy, Desert Marigold, and many of the Penstemon species respond well to periodic light shearing to allow for a fresh start.

And then there is the bizarre. One of the most unnecessary pruning practices is the removal of all the lower leaves on Desert Spoons. The reason they are trimmed up is likely due to the fact that nearly all of the Sotols have small teeth on the leaf margins. They are apt to catch any litter that might go airborne, and if planted too closely to walks or parking lanes they will certainly rip the skin. The shag of brown leaves forming a skirt at the base of *Dasyllirion*, *Yucca* and *Nolina* looks natural so why not leave it in place. Designers might also consider giving them wider berth.

Finally we have the absurd. There is absolutely no reason to power-shear the tops of Red Yuccas or Ocotillo. This totally defies logic and the practice should be stopped. Red yucca trimmed in this manner produces new growth from within, and the result looks like a botched haircut. Ocotillo will produce new shoots near the cut creating a sort of witch's broom.



Sheared Red Yucca

With a little training, maintenance crews can properly prune desert adapted shrubs with minimal litter cleanup, reduced dump fees and so much more time to properly maintain the irrigation system or to perform a little weeding. Remember, hide the power shears!