

# The Tool Shed



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## Cutting Tools

The history of pruning has its roots in the vineyard and dates back thousands of years. It was noted that the grapevines chewed back by wild animals quickly regenerated and produced more fruit than untouched vines. Through the years we have refined the techniques and tools significantly but the goal is still to exert some influence over the shape and growth of plants. Trees, shrubs, and plants will produce healthy balanced growth patterns with proper pruning. Pruning is a skill that can be learned. Practice and experience are necessary, but a good textbook with 'when, where, and how' instructions will help speed the skill development.

The human hand is the body part most used and often abused in pruning. Consider the type of pruning and the amount you have to do when shopping for your tools. Flower, shrub, and tree pruning all need different cutting tools to ensure the health of the plant as well as the ease of the work.

The average yard consisting of flowers, vegetables, herbs, shrubs, and trees should have at least a flower shear/scissor, hand pruner, lopper, and saw. Larger trees may require a pole pruner.

Flower or precision shears are lightweight, long, thin bladed scissor-like shears. Make sure they are comfortable in your hand and the size of the tool works for your type gardening. Crowded perennial gardens need a smaller tool designed for getting into tight spaces.

Hand pruners are the most useful of all the garden cutting tools. Intended for general cutting of woody stems, they are also often used for flower, fruit and vegetable harvesting. There are two main types of hand pruners: bypass and anvil. Bypass pruners are based on the nineteenth century French pruners called secateurs. The slightly curved shape of the blades is designed to draw the blade through the wood in a clean cut when the blades pass by each other. Anvil pruners have a single cutting blade that closes on a flat surface much like a knife and cutting board. This type of pruner often causes crushing injuries to green wood. The size of the anvil can prevent cuts close to the bark resulting in a short stub of the branch being left. Anvil pruners are more effective on deadwood than bypass pruners and their power can cut through larger than expected stems.

A specialized version of the anvil pruner is the ratchet-action pruner. The ratchet action increases the cutting force by as much as 30 percent. Any gardener with a less than strong grip may find these a very useful alternative to bypass pruners.

In choosing a pruner consider the type of pruning to be done, your strength and the durability of the tool. Make sure the tool fits your hand. A poorly fitting tool will make you more prone to blisters. If the tool is too heavy, or the handles are too far apart, your hand will tire quickly. A pruner works at its peak when the blade is sharp. Consider a tool that is easy to sharpen or has a replaceable blade so you don't have to dispose of the tool after you have sharpened the blade to the point of uselessness.

Loppers are similar in principle to hand pruners but just on a larger, heavier scale. Branches up to 2 inches in diameter can be cut with some loppers. Ratchet action loppers are available and the increased cutting force is a great benefit in this size tool. When a hand pruner won't easily cut through a branch it is best for the plant, the tool, and the operator to go for big guns and pull out the loppers.

A pruning saw is the next step up the pruning tree and its' purposes vary. There are as many saw designs as there are jobs to be done. Blades vary in length from 6 inches to as long as 24 inches. The blade length, number of teeth per inch, the angle of the teeth (called Kerf), the shape of the blade and the style of the handle are factors to evaluate in the selection of your saw.

A good selection of pruning tools might include 2 styles of pruning saws, perhaps a medium size bow saw for larger jobs and a 7 or 8 inch folding saw for the more common clean up and trimming work. The kerf of a saw determines whether the cutting action is on the pull, push, or both. One is not better than the other, but to get maximum results from your saw you need to adapt your effort to the technology of the tool. Because a saw blade is thin it is important to buy a saw with good quality high carbon tempered steel. A blade can get stuck while pruning and can snap. This is another reason to make sure you are using the tool in the correct manner and also a good reason to use safety goggles.

A pole pruner enables you to reach higher branches. Some pole pruners combine a saw on one side and a lopper type cutter on the other. Telescoping poles sometimes reach as high as 16 feet so extreme care should be used if you are anywhere near power lines. A second area of concern when using a pole pruner is falling limbs. A good pole pruner must be able to make fast clean cuts so you can better anticipate the results. Using a pole pruner looks easier than it is. The best rule is to just call a professional arborist for any tree work near power lines, involving large limbs or if you are the least bit leery of the job.

Pruning can be fun and greatly enhance the look of your yard and garden. The investment in the right tools and the effort involved in learning the skills will be worth it. Have fun and be safe!