

Basic Pruning & Deadheading Techniques For Common California Native Plants

Yerba Buena Nursery, Half Moon Bay, CA

Preface to Pruning

- **Decide what you are after.** Why are you pruning this plant?
- **Use proper tools that are sharp and sanitized.** "Felco" is a brand of top quality Swiss pruners that we use at the nursery, but any pair of sharp, quality pruners will do. If pruning any dead or diseased wood, thoroughly wipe the blade of your tool with alcohol before moving on to the next cut.
- **Begin by removing any dead wood.** This is always good for the health of the plant, and leaves you with a clearer view of the work left to be done. In many cases, simply removing dead growth will make the shrub look 10 times better, and you can stop there. If work still needs to be done...
- **Use your powers of imagination!** How will the shrub look with all the crossing branches removed? Will there be anything left? What if you take off the top third? What about after it re-grows? Will you have a 'mop head' of foliage on a bunch of straggly stems?
- **Work slowly.** Before pruning a branch, bend it out of the way if possible and decide if you **really** want to remove it. Look at the foliage attached to it - often an errant branch that is bothering you has a significant amount of greenery attached to it you may not have realized. Better to realize this sooner rather than later.

Deadheading Perennials

Deadheading is the simple pruning of spent flower stalks and seed heads to clean up and rejuvenate the plant. While unnecessary for most shrubs, this treatment always benefits flowering perennials. (A perennial is a small flowering plant that does not get larger and 'woody' after a year or two, such as Columbine, Penstemon, Seaside Daisy, etc.)

Typically deadheading is done shortly after the plant stops producing new flowers. With some natives, such as Penstemon and Monkeyflowers, removing spent blossoms will encourage the plant to re-bloom again the same season! Others such as Sages typically do not bloom again but look more attractive with this treatment.

Whatever the plant, **the basic procedure involves finding a spent flower stalk on the plant, and clipping the stalk back to the first set of healthy leaves below the flower stalk.**

An important note about deadheading - by cutting flower stalks as soon as they fade, you are preventing the plant from producing seed, and so its **energy goes back into producing new growth, and sometimes new flowers.**

Leave trimmings & seeds in your garden for wildlife. Many garden visitors of the non-human kind rely on seeds for their meals, though, so to strike a balance between a neat garden and a garden with high wildlife value, we don't go overboard pruning back every spent blossom - we allow a fair amount of perennials in our garden to go to seed, then cut them back and place the seed-containing refuse in an area where birds and other animals congregate. This pile of branches and seeds is irresistible to quail and other small birds in late summer!

For many native perennials, and a few shrubs, a decent deadheading may be all the pruning they need! **It is remarkable what a difference this simple technique makes in the attractiveness and longevity of some plants.** Plants that have a woody base to them but produce lots of lush growth each season, such as Monkeyflowers and Penstemon seem to respond especially well to this technique.

We recommend deadheading all native perennials - either at the end of their blooming cycle or in early fall. A calendar for these isn't really necessary - just watch the plants' flowering cycle and they will tell you when it's time. For perennials with particular requirements, a short table is below - otherwise follow instructions above. Shrubs that appreciate deadheading are included in the calendar at the end of this article.

Perennials with particular pruning requirements

Botanical Name	Common Name	Season to Prune	Notes
Epilobium sp.	California Fuchsia	Winter	Cut entire plant back to 1" tall
Heterotheca sessiliflora	Golden Aster	Summer	Shear with scissors or weed trimmer
Mimulus sp.	Monkeyflower	Fall	Cut back plant to approx. 1' round, leaving existing green on the woody interior branches
Solanum species	Nightshade	Summer-Fall	Cut flowering stalks to base of plant
Verbena lilacina	Verbena	Year-Round	Remove individual spent flower stalks – Plants can flower perpetually with proper deadheading!

Shearing

This is the type of pruning you should use least often. It essentially involves **removing the outer layer of foliage**, so that the foliage grows back denser. While appropriate for certain plants, many respond negatively to this treatment, especially if used as a long term strategy to keep a shrub small.

Plants you can Shear

Botanical Name	Common Name	Season to Prune	Notes
Arctostaphylos densiflora	Howard McMinn's Manzanita	Summer	Shearing is a bad idea for most other manzanitas
Prunus ilicifolia	Hollyleaf Cherry	Summer	
Rhus ovata	Sugar Bush	Summer	
Rhus integrifolia	Lemonade Berry	Summer	
Myrica californica	Wax Myrtle	Summer	
Salvia species	Sage	Summer	Do not cut into old wood/interior of plant!

Selective Pruning

Often the best technique to use, this method involves what it sounds like: **carefully removing particular branches to achieve the shape you desire.** This method can open up a shrub, allowing more light through, it can limit the size of the shrub and, done well, it works to highlight the shrub's natural beauty. **Most of the shrubs mentioned in our pruning calendar respond best to this technique.**

Pruning to Control Size

Over the long term, pruning most native shrubs to limit their size does not work. The plants end up growing faster to compensate for their lost foliage, until they begin to lose vigor and you are left with a twiggy exterior. There are exceptions to this (see the section on Shearing for examples), but in general it is not a good strategy - **far better to choose appropriate sized plants for a given area, or, when things get crowded, take a deep breath and choose which plants to take out entirely.**

Having said that, when plants do need to be taken back a bit, clipping the plant back to the size you wish it to remain at is usually not the best strategy. Rather, **find the branch that is growing too tall and trace it back into the interior of the shrub where it meets with a major branch.** If you remove it there the shrub will have a bit of a hole in its canopy for a while but will usually fill in. The same method can be employed to maintain spreading shrubs' width. Don't shear it off at the edge of the sidewalk - lift up the branches till you find the lowest layer, and clip that back to the fork. Take a look, and remove another layer if you need to. **This is better for the health of the plant and looks much more natural.**

Coppicing

A somewhat radical pruning technique, **coppicing involves cutting the plant down to the ground!** This naturally is given serious thought before we go ahead with it. While a very rare occurrence when applied to the right species, this method can kill the plant. But if a shrub has gotten far too large for its area, or all the foliage and flowers have migrated to the upper third of the plant, it can work wonders. Also keep in mind that you are only pruning the upper half of the organism, not the roots, so it will grow back in a surprisingly short time. Most of the plants we have done this to are full grown again in two to three years, only they look way, way better.

Plants you can Coppice

Botanical Name	Common Name	Season to Prune	Notes
Baccharis pilularis	Coyote Bush	Early Spring	Highly recommended! Necessary every 2-4 years
Carpenteria californica	Bush Anemone	Early Spring	May lose flowers for a year or two but shrub looks dramatically nicer
Cercis occidentalis	Redbud	Fall	Excellent for rejuvenating old thinning specimen
Cornus sericea	Red-Twig Dogwood	Early Spring	Enhances shape and redness of stems - recommended!
Encelia californica	Brittlebush	Winter	Cut to 4" stub for bushy plant next year
Heteromeles arbutifolia	Toyon	Summer	Creates dense shrub from old treelike specimens
Philadelphus lewisii	Mock Orange	Summer	If specimen is sparse and woody this will create a dense shrub again
Rhamnus californica	Coffeeberry	Early Spring	Do only with old, open specimens
Sambucus mexicana	Blue Elderberry	Early Spring	Creates pleasing mounded shrub
Symphoricarpos albus	Snowberry	Winter	Rejuvenates old patches that have gotten woody

Grasses and Ferns

Grasses and ferns are very easy plants to maintain. Since they possess similar growth habits - outer foliage withering as new growth is produced from the center of the clump - pruning them is very similar. **With the grasses, late summer or early fall is the best time of year to prune.** Scissors often work better than pruners for this soft, flexible material.

The first step is to prune the 'skirt' of old foliage most grasses develop. Grab a clump of newer, taller foliage and lift it toward the center of the plant. Taking your scissors, reach in close to the core of the grass and cut away the bottom layer of foliage closest to the ground. Work your way around the grass in this fashion, clear the debris, and take a look. If you need to work around once more, do so. If the bulk of the grass has a lot of dead stems making it look 'thatchy', some additional work is needed.

You can safely prune grasses back to about 1/2-1/3 of their original size. The method for this is quite similar to removing the skirt - grab a clump of grass, twist a bit, and snip, working your way around the clump. It will look a bit odd for a few weeks, but will soon begin to push new growth. We do this to our larger grasses like Deer Grass and California Fescue only every 2-3 years, and they look much fresher as a result.

Ferns are even easier than the grasses - simply work your way around the plant, cutting back brown fronds as you go. Unless the plant has already produced a flush of new growth we don't recommend removing green fronds, even if a bit tattered - **you may want to prune once in Autumn, then again in late winter after the plant has produced a flush of new growth.**

Trees

The art and science of pruning trees is a subject that many people literally get Master's degrees in before attempting. It is really, really easy to permanently injure a tree, ruining its health and looks for life. It is also easy to hurt yourself! **It is the one pruning job we hire outside experts to do here at the nursery.** If you value your trees, and we're sure you do, we suggest you do the same - it's just too easy to cause irrevocable damage while trying to do something good for the tree.

Shrub Pruning Calendar

Botanical Name	Common Name	Season to Prune	Notes
Arctostaphylos spp.	Manzanita	Summer	Shear McMinn's Manzanita; selectively prune other species. Rarely benefits from pruning except to remove dead wood. Once canopy is pruned open it rarely grows densely again!
Artemisia californica	Sagebrush	Fall	Cut by 1/2 in fall
Baccharis pilularis	Coyote Bush	Winter	Selectively prune in summer; coppice every 3rd-4th winter to renew
Berberis spp.	Oregon Grape	Summer	Selectively prune old canes to encourage new growth
Ceanothus spp.	Wild Lilac	Summer	Prune branches back to trunk; otherwise only tip back spent blooms
Cercis occidentalis	Redbud	Fall	Selectively prune dead/crossed branches; coppice if plant is 'tired'
Cornus sericea	Red Twig Dogwood	Early Spring	Selectively prune to shape; coppice every year or two for better color
Dendromecon harfordii	Bush Poppy	Winter	Selectively prune outer branches and tip upper shoots; coppicing risky but produces beautiful plant when it works
Encelia californica	Brittlebush	Early Spring	Deadhead; coppice plants each winter
Eriogonum spp.	Buckwheat	Fall	Deadhead and prune dead growth in fall; coppicing can renew woody specimen but may kill plant
Fremontodendron spp.	Flannelbush	Summer	Only prune branches if absolutely necessary -- cuts are slow to heal and easily infected. Tip prune young plants lightly for bushier plant. Wear protection from irritating fuzz!
Galvezia speciosa	Island Bush Snapdragon	Summer and Fall	Deadhead flower stalks as they fade for denser plant and more flowers
Heteromeles arbutifolia	Toyon	Summer	Selectively prune/remove suckers to encourage upright growth; coppice to rejuvenate or create lovely mounded shrub
Keckiella spp.	Climbing Penstemon	Fall	Prune by 1/2

Lepechinia spp.	Pitcher Sage	Early Spring	Prune by 1/2
Lonicera involucrata	Twinberry	Early Spring	Coppice for more flowers and a better form
Lupinus arboreus	Lupine	Early Spring	Prune by 1/2
Malacothamnus spp.	Mallow	Fall	Remove top 1/3 of plant
Mimulus - shrubby spp.	Monkeyflower	Summer or Fall	Look for buds of new growth coming out of old wood, do not prune below these
Myrica californica	Wax Myrtle	Summer	Can be sheared or limbed up to form small tree
Philadelphus lewisii	Mock Orange	Summer	Deadhead flowered stalks each summer; Selectively prune dead or crowded canes; can also be coppiced to rejuvenate
Prunus ilicifolia	Holly Leaf Cherry	Summer	Can be sheared or selectively pruned for a small tree; old sparse specimens can be coppiced to renew
Rhamnus californica	Coffeeberry	Summer	Selectively prune to shape or limit height; can also be coppiced
Ribes spp.	Currant	Fall	Selectively prune crossed/dead branches
Romneya coulteri	Matilija Poppy	Winter	Prune entire plant to 6" tall
Rosa californica	Wild Rose	Winter	Can be selectively pruned to thin or control, or coppiced
Rosa gymnocarpa	Wood Rose	Winter	Selectively prune to encourage new growth
Salvia - shrubby spp.	Sage	Summer	Deadhead, remove dead growth, and shear very lightly to keep dense. Can also be pruned around perimeter to limit spread
Sambucus spp.	Elderberry	Early Spring	Selectively prune for lovely small tree or coppice for large mounding shrub
Symphoricarpos albus	Snowberry	Winter	Coppice if plant has become woody and sparse

Definitions	
Coppicing	Cutting shrub to ground to encourage bushy new growth
Selective Pruning	Thoughtful removal of particular branches to achieve desired effect
Shearing	Light overall pruning of plant to limit size and encourage dense growth
Deadheading	Removal of spent flower stalks from plant

Recommended Reading

Our favorite book for pruning technique is "**Care & Maintenance of Southern California Native Plant Gardens**," by Bart O'Brien, Betsey Landis and Ellen Mackey. This bi-lingual book (Spanish/English) outlines gardening techniques for native plants with chapters on soil, watering, planting, pruning, pest & weed management. These techniques apply to Northern California gardens. While this book is out of print and somewhat hard to find, the world wide web provides a great resource for finding your own copy of this book!

Further Steps:

While this guide is a good jumping off point to maintaining your garden, please remember that we are a resource for you here at Yerba Buena Nursery. If you have questions, would like clarifications on anything read above, or don't see your plant on this list?

Give us a call at (650) 851-1668

We also offer a **Garden Tune-Up Service**, where our Nursery Manager can come to your home and work directly with your plants to give you hands-on guidance. It often feels like a daunting task to begin learning about proper care and maintenance of your Native plants. Never fear, we are here to help!

Information about our Tune-Up Service can be found on our website:
www.yerbabuenanursery.com/garden_tuneup.php