

Janet Macunovich's Growing Concerns:

Answers to your gardening questions

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Tip of the week:

Clip the first **bulb flowers** and enjoy them in a vase. Spring can come in a rush. While we're still indoors thinking it's too cold to be out, the earliest flowers may be pollinated and **finish blooming in just a few days!**

It's most sad to see flowers go unseen in the gardens of people who are no longer as spry and active as they once were. For some, I've already **cut snow crocus and netted iris** (*Crocus minimus* and *Iris reticulata*) in hopes the blooms will **brighten the living room** and also coax their audiences outdoors.

Don't be stumped by Spiraea pruning rules

Dear Janet,

Just returned from a trip to the U.K., and while visiting several gardens there, I noticed the *Spiraea* were pruned way back, about 3 inches or so from the ground. So I'm wondering what to do with my *Spiraea japonica* -- **what's common pruning practice?** - M.C. -



Dwarf *Spiraea* more upright (left when it's cut to the ground. Its branches may be more lax (above) if left un-cut.
Photos ©2008 Steven Nikkila

One of the best characteristics of the dwarf spireas is affability, M.C. That is, do what you like to one of this group (*Spiraea albiflora*, *S. japonica*, and *S. x bumalda*) and the shrub will simply shrug, grin, grow and manage to look good. Thus **there is no standard practice** when

it comes to managing dwarf spirea. Some people just leave them to grow, others cut them a little or a lot, early in the season or after they bloom.

Treat dwarf spirea to suit your desires. **Here are some treatments** and their effect on the shrub:

- Grow it in a sunny, well drained soil and **don't cut it at all**. It'll grow to two-, three- or four feet tall and wide. Size depends on variety: 'Alpina' and 'Limemound' top out at about two feet while 'Anthony Waterer' and 'Froebeli' regularly reach four.

Bloom begins about 8 weeks after spring budbreak. It may pause and then produce some second-flush flowers several weeks later. Its main **limbs may splay** a bit over the years, top-heavy as uppermost side branches outgrow the lower. The higher twigs also bear most of the flowers, more weight to make the primary canes arch. The plant may begin to look a bit dowdy.

- **Shear the shrub after its first bloom**, clipping the top few inches to remove all spent flowers. This may increase the quantity of flowers in the second flush.

Even if bloom count is unaffected, the **second set of blossoms will have more visual impact** than on plants that weren't sheared because flowers won't be hidden among brown seed capsules.

- **Cut out some old canes every spring** before budbreak. This shrub always has some brand new growth coming from low down plus older wood. With old wood flowering first followed by new, the bloom season may stretch over 4 or 5 weeks.

This shrub's **overall habit will be intermediate**. It's the visual middle ground between the very orderly, uniform and slightly stiff look of an individual that grows all new canes each year, and one that's been allowed to relax outward.

- **Cut the whole shrub to the ground** just before budbreak. Reduce it to stubs a few inches tall, as you saw in Britain. Then the plant produces all new canes, all of them straight, arranged in orderly fashion and bearing flowers primarily at the tips.

The plant may be about 20% smaller than if it had not been stumped back. The season's first **bloom will begin two- or three weeks after that of un-cut plants**. Any repeat bloom also comes a bit later .

A spirea is a spirea is a spirea: Not!

Spiraea bushes are in the rose family. However, "A rose is a rose is a rose" does not apply. There are two groups.

The dwarf spireas bloom in summer, (discussed above). Don't confuse them with their **spring blooming** cousins (here), which won't bloom that year if cut back in spring.

This is not a problem if the shrubs are being grown as a hedge. There, flowering is not necessary and may even mar the uniform look. All spireas are admirable in hedge.

- Bridal wreath spirea* (*S. prunifolia*). Upright to 9 feet. Good fall color. Zone 4.
- Japanese snowmound** (*S. nipponica*). Stiffly arching branches. 5 to 7 feet tall. Zone 4.
- Snowmound spirea*** (*Spiraea x vanhouttei*). Classic, gracefully arching, dense mound, 5 to 7 feet. Zone 4.
- Baby's breath spirea# (*S. thunbergii*). Mounded, 5 feet tall and wide. Zone 4.

* Copy these URLs to your browser bar to learn more:

*<http://classes.hortla.wsu.edu/hort231/List06/Spirpru.html>

**www.mobot.org/gardeninghelp/plantfinder/plant.asp?code=F660

***www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/shrubselector/detail_plant.cfm?PlantID=447

#http://www.floridata.com/ref/S/spir_thu.cfm

It's a tangle: Tree growing in shrub

Can you help me? I have a weigela## bush. Some kind of **tree is growing in this bush**, right in the middle. I've cut it and dug at its roots and it keeps coming back. Is there some other **way to get rid of it?** - P.P. -

Dear P.P.,

Few things are more aggravating or more common than woody weeds within a shrub, hedge, or fence. So yes, I've dealt with that situation and can help.

You'll **need three things**. One, a small saw### or a sharp pair of loppers*. Two, an artist's paint brush you won't mind throwing away when you're done. Three, a small bottle of a systemic weed killer such as Roundup or Brush-B-Gon in a formulation that calls for mixing with water before application. "Small" is a key word here. You'll need only a little bit of weed killer -- no sense accumulating hazardous substances just to sit in the garage. So ask friends and neighbors rather than shop for the herbicide. See if anyone has a partly-used bottle that you can take off their hands.

First **cut the interloping tree down to a stub** -- or stubs. Then use the artist's paintbrush to **dab the stub with weed killer**, right on the fresh cut surface, straight from the bottle. Coat only the cut surface, focusing most closely on the outermost growth rings -- there's no need to paint the bark. Wear chemical rubber gloves. Be very careful not to drip any herbicide on your weigela.

This treatment can work in one step but killing very persistent species such as mulberry trees and almost anything that has become well established may call for a second, and sometimes a third blow. So in two weeks, **check the stubs for sprouts**. Recheck monthly. Mark your calendar to do this, because this step is as easy to forget as it is critical to success. Delaying the check for a few weeks may seem like only a short lapse to you but that can be enough time for the tree to grow back and regain its strength.

If any sprouts appear, cut them and dab more weed killer on the spot where they originated.

Copy these URLs to your browser to learn more:

##http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/consumer/factsheets/shrubs/weigela_florida.html

###<http://karlkuemmerling.com/store/product752.html>

*<http://karlkuemmerling.com/store/product572.html>

Cursing heaven

Tree of heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) may be one of the world's most-cursed "heavenly" objects. Tenacity in the face of pollution, drought tight spaces and physical abuse earned it immortality as "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn." Its tendency to thrive along fence lines and as a weed in hedges earn it the muttered oaths of gardeners on four continents.

A good hedge is simple to find

Almost any plant can be cut regularly to hold a shape, and so form a reasonable hedge.

However, the **best plants for a hedge** that you want to be uniform and hold a neat trim:

- Have a **uniform growth rate**. Shoots that emerge after a trimming do so evenly.
- Have **small leaves**. Clipping doesn't leave half-leaves that brown to discolor the hedge.
- Are **twiggy**. New growth comes to fill gaps.
- **Can be cut hard**. Will grow even from leafless wood.
- **Grow evenly** in a variety of conditions. As a hedge, look uniform even as it spans sun-to-shade or good-to-poor soil conditions.

Bushes that make great hedges:

Barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*)
Burning bush (*Euonymus alatus*)
Cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster species*)
Inkberry holly (*Ilex vomitoria*)
Littleleaf boxwood (*Buxus microphylla*)
Privet (*Ligustrum species*)
Spirea (*Spiraea species*)
Yew (*Taxus species and varieties*)

For herbicide haters: Options.

Two alternatives to store-bought herbicide:

One: **Persistence and starvation.** Cut the stump. Return every week for a month and then every two weeks throughout the growing season to clip off any sprout that emerges from the stump. Every sprout costs the tree energy, and if a sprout has only a few days to convert sunlight to energy before you kill it, there's a net loss to the plant. Cut all shoots swiftly and eventually the energy stored in the tree's roots is exhausted and the plant dies.

The older the tree, the more energy it has in its roots. So if you're out to kill an entrenched weed tree, be ready for a season-long battle and even a check the following spring.

Two: **Death by dehydration.** Use muslin or close-woven but porous fabric to make a flat bag that's large enough to lay like a big tea bag across the entire cut surface of the stump.

Fill the bag with salt -- table salt, rock salt or sodium chloride de-icer -- then wet the bag. Lay it over the stump's cut surface, making sure it's covering the outermost growth rings.

Now cover the salt bag with a piece of plastic. Fold the plastic's edges down around the stump and wrap a piece of electric tape or duct tape to hold them tight and limit leaking of salt. Remove the salt bag once it's clear that its drying effect has killed the stump.

Warning: This may sound simple and safe but the effect of a salt spill or leak can be more lethal to plants and soil as well as more long lasting than that of purchased systemic herbicides. So be very careful.

Repetitive activities such as weeding might look tedious and unfulfilling to the uninitiated but they can attain a certain rhythm, become a form of moving meditation
- Ken Druse -

Where to find a pear

I want to plant some fruit trees but I don't find very many kinds at the garden center. Where is a **good place to buy fruit trees?** I plan to start with a pear tree. - A.G. -

There are dozens of varieties of fruit trees, A.G. Count all the apple and pear names in your grocer's produce section and realize each came from a different kind of tree. That can give you an inkling of the **diversity available.**

However, fruit trees are not much in demand at residential garden centers. So those retailers are unable to stock much variety. I recommend you **order by mail.**

A grower I have been pleased with for many years which offers hardy varieties of fruit trees is **Miller Nurseries** (www.millernurseries.com) in northern New York. Miller offers at least 8 kinds of pear (*Pyrus*) from old favorite 'Beurre Bosc' and 'Max-Red Bartlett' to less well known varieties such as the Asian pear 'Shinseiki.' Many are available in both standard size (over 20 feet tall) and dwarf trees (easier picking at about 8 feet).

A pear is a good choice for a first fruit tree. Have fun!

This week in Janet's garden

Grow with me! This week I will:

Clip the first bulb flowers and enjoy them in a vase. When spring comes late, it may well come in a rush. Given sudden warm days the earliest flowers may be pollinated and finish blooming in just a few days! Chances are we will still be indoors then, thinking it's too cold to be out.

It's most sad to see flowers go unseen in gardens I grow for people who are no longer as spry and active as they once were. For some, I've already cut snow crocus and netted iris (*Iris reticulata*) so blooms will brighten the living room and maybe coax their audiences outdoors.

Clear the ground around emerging bulbs in the spotlight -- near a door, along a main walk, outside a kitchen window or alongside our parking space. I'll weed there and remove leafy debris so dark bare soil is all that surrounds the bulb foliage.

On that clean soil I'll **sow seeds of cool season annuals** such as pot marigold (*Calendula*), sweet alyssum, sweet peas or love-in-a-mist (*Nigella*). On dark soil warming quickly, seeds will sprout as bulbs bloom. When the annuals sprout I'll cut the bulb leaves away or let them be subsumed.

Bare soil warms so quickly that the bulbs may come up very fast and be more vulnerable to hard frosts. I clip a few springy **evergreen boughs** and set them close by these showcases. They will be **ready to use to blanket the bulbs and annual seedlings** on frigid nights.

Rejoice that my big **front-porch container is coming back to life**. Its perennial inhabitants -- lavender, sage and thyme -- survived winter even though their roots had to weather greater cold than if they had been sunk in the ground.

I see buds breaking low on the sage and lavender stems, and all along thyme branches. Yet I'll deny my urge for neatness and **refrain from clipping** the plants back to just above a strong new shoot. Even dead, those limbs provide some frost protection to tender young growth. Better to leave that canopy of straggly branches for a couple weeks more.

Wrap-up... and down

Green thumbs up: To remembering as I garden that **a healthy lawn** makes the beds within it look even better and that now is the time to help a lawn be all it can be. It's time to sharpen mower blades since sharp cuts cause grass plants less stress and create fewer brown edges. Aerating is quick and yields high returns, especially where snow was piled. Grass roots there will have plenty of oxygen to work with. In trouble spots, raking away dead grass (but *not* "dethatching" which is almost always a bad move) is a good move so the premium grass seed you sow there will be in good contact with the soil.

Green thumbs down: To **forcing shrubs into shapes far removed from their natural** habits. Clip a naturally round barberry into a square, a wide-spreading yew into a column or an upright arborvitae into a mound and the plants will do all they can as soon as they can to reestablish their genetically determined shapes. That kind of pruning creates the need for more touch-ups, more often. This year, round out that barberry hedge, replace the over-tall arbs with something more squat and stay tuned here for locations of my pruning demonstrations in summer so you can learn to turn those yews into feathery wonders.

Who's Janet?

A professional gardener and educator since 1984, Janet Macunovich designs, plants and tends gardens through her business, Perennial Favorites. She teaches and writes about gardening at schools, conferences, in her books, this weekly column, the monthly Michigan Gardener and other publications. Email questions to her at JMaxGarden@aol.com.