

Low Desert Pruning Guide for Commonly Used Shrubs

Use the following tables as a guideline to determine the right time to prune for many common shrubs. Most plants will do their best if allowed to grow to their natural form and shape. Shearing and excessive pruning compromises the vigor and health of the plant, reduces blooming, and may shorten the life of the plant. Remember: Every time you shear a plant, you create wounds that stress the plant, requiring additional energy and water for the plant to recover.

Fall and Winter Pruning (October through January)

Green thumb tip for fall/winter pruning: Do not prune any frost sensitive plants (the table on Pruning of Frost damaged provides examples of frost sensitive plants) at this time. The upper branches and foliage will help insulate the lower branches so that less frost damage occurs.

Common Name	Scientific Name	Blooming Season	Pruning
Texas Sage Violet Silverleaf (or "Cloud" series) Chihuahuan Sage	<i>Leucophyllum frutescens</i> <i>L. candidum</i> <i>L. laevigatum</i>	Summer and fall	No pruning required if selected for the appropriate space. If needed, 2-step or renewal pruning is recommended in late winter or very early spring. Don't shear.
Silver Dalea Black Dalea Trailing Dalea Yellow Bush Dalea Bush Dalea	<i>Dalea bicolor</i> <i>D. frutescens</i> <i>D. greggii</i> <i>D. lutea</i> <i>D. pulchra</i>	Fall Late summer and fall Late fall	Prune vigorous species by renewal pruning of one third to one half in early fall.
Pink Muhly Grass Deer Grass Mexican Thread Grass	<i>Muhlenbergia capillaris</i> <i>Muhlenbergia rigens</i> <i>Stipa tenuissima</i>	Flowers spikes occur fall through winter	Cut back 6 inches from ground in late winter. It is better to cut flat or parallel to the ground than to make a rounded cut.
Chaparral Sage Autumn Sage Mexican Bush Sage	<i>Salvia. clevelandii</i> <i>S. greggii</i> <i>S. leucantha</i>	Spring, or spring through summer.	Cut back old stems in winter or early spring. Deadhead spent flower stems. If needed, renewal pruning in early fall for <i>clevelandii</i> and <i>greggii</i> ; in the winter for <i>leucantha</i> .

Pruning of Frost Damaged Plants – late February through March after any chance of frost

Green thumb tips for pruning frost damaged plants: “The mesquite trees do not lie” is a good method to determine if the danger of frost is over for the season. The leafing out of the mesquite trees (when the green buds open) is typically a good indication that the danger of frost is over. In the Phoenix area this typically occurs in late February or early March.

Common Name	Scientific Name	Blooming Season	Pruning
Bougainvillea	<i>Bougainvillea sp.</i>	Spring through fall	Severe renewal pruning to remove dead wood or frost damage in early Feb. - March. Remove offshoots or vigorous growth as needed.
Lantana	<i>Lantana spp.</i>	Spring through fall.	Renewal pruning - Can be cut to ground in March to remove frost-damaged wood. Can prune during growing season to control shape, if necessary.
Natal Plum	<i>Carissa grandiflora</i>	Flowers on new growth in early summer.	Renewal pruning of dead wood or frost damage in early Feb.- March. Remove offshoots or vigorous growth as needed using 2-Step method. Avoid shearing.
Chuparosa Mexican Honeysuckle	<i>Justicia californica</i> <i>J. spicigera</i>	Spring and intermittent during summer and fall.	Little to no pruning needed. Remove old woody stems to rejuvenate. Light pruning after spring if desired.
Red Bird of Paradise Desert Bird of Paradise Mexican Bird of Paradise	<i>Caesalpinia pulcherrima</i> <i>C. gilliesii</i> <i>C. mexicana</i>	Late spring to fall. Leaf drop and some die back will naturally occur in the winter.	If needed, major renewal pruning is done in late winter, early spring. If stems are twiggy, cut <i>C. pulcherrima</i> to 6-12" above ground in late Feb. after chance of frost.

Spring Pruning (April through mid June)

Green thumb tips for spring pruning: If flowers are produced on the previous season's growth so that the plant blooms in the early spring, then any needed pruning should be done after they bloom (example: Brittle Bush and Chuparosa)

If a shrub blooms on tissue that is produced during the current season's growth (i.e. usually blooming later in the spring or during the summer and early fall) then any needed pruning should be done before May and, if they are not frost sensitive, as early as February (example: Texas Sage).

Common Name	Scientific Name	Blooming Season	Pruning
Baja Fairy Duster Pink Fairy Duster	<i>Calliandra californica</i> <i>C. eriophylla</i>	Spring to fall	Light, 2-step pruning (if needed) in late spring after first flowering. Don't shear. Avoid over-watering which causes excessive growth.
Oleander	<i>Nerium oleander</i>	Late spring to fall.	2-step pruning in spring/early summer or after bloom, remove old wood. Don't shear.
Trailing Rosemary	<i>Rosemarinus officinalis</i> 'Prostrata'	Early spring	Light pruning after flowering in spring to control shape or cut back to woody stems to rejuvenate.
Yellow Bells Orange Bells	<i>Tecoma stans</i> <i>Tecoma</i> hybrid	Spring to fall	Prune dead wood in early spring, otherwise light pruning as needed.
Brittlebush	<i>Encelia farinosa</i>	Spring	Trim tall flower stems down to leaves after flowering. Avoid over-watering which causes excessive growth.
Feathery Cassia Green Cassia Silvery Cassia	<i>Cassia artemisioides</i> <i>C. nemophila</i> <i>C. phyllodenia</i>	Late winter to spring.	No pruning required if selected for the appropriate space. If necessary, 2-step prune after flowering while temperatures are still cool.
Chuparosa	<i>Justica californica</i>	Late winter to spring	If needed, prune after blooming.

General Pruning Tips for Other Plants

Common name	Scientific name	Pruning Tips
Agave	<i>Agave spp.</i>	Pruning only considered after a severe frost. Otherwise avoid pruning. Do not prune into a pineapple shape. Pruning wounds often lead to pest infestations. Note: most Agave species will die after blooming.
Ocotillo	<i>Fouquieria splendens</i>	Do not prune. Plant in an area that will accommodate mature size.
Red or yellow yucca	<i>Hesperaloe parviflora</i>	Avoid all pruning or shearing. Dried flower stalks can be removed.
Yucca Desert Spoon	<i>Yucca spp.</i> <i>Dasylirion wheeleri</i>	Avoid all pruning or shearing. Dry, old leaves can be “peeled” on some species of yucca. Can remove old flower stalks after blooming.
Mexican Blue Palm Mediterranean Fan Palm	<i>Brahea armata</i> <i>Chamaerops humilis</i>	Cut dry or dead fronds. Do not above a 45 degree angle or cut the new green growth from the center.
Prickly Pear	<i>Opuntia spp.</i>	Plant in an area that will accommodate mature size. If needed, make pruning cuts at the joints.

Methods of Pruning

1. Do-Nothing Method

“Do no (pruning) harm” is usually the best method of care for your plants. Only prune to remove dead or diseased wood. This is particularly true for plants in the ground for less than three years. Over time, most shrubs and especially trees will develop into attractive and healthy plants when left alone.

2. Two-Step Method for Shrubs

Use to control size yet maintain natural shape. Shrub pruning should not be done more than once or twice a year.

Step one: Cut back branches and stems to a half-globe shape.

Step two: Cut every other branch back (approximately 6 to 9 inches) to the first large “fork” on the branch or where the branch splits into a “V” shape. This opens the interior to sunlight and produces an informal or natural look.

3. Selective Pruning Method for Trees

Do not prune trees planted less than 3 years ago, except to remove dead, crossing or broken branches. Carefully selected branches and stems are cut back near a supporting branch. No more than 25 percent of a tree’s canopy should be removed in any given year. Shearing, stubbing, flush cuts, heading or topping can cause many long-term problems and are not recommended.

4. Renewal Method

This method is used for many small shrubs, perennials, ornamental grasses, and frost damaged shrubs, groundcovers, and vines. Severe cut back after the growing season or just prior to new growth in the spring. Frost damaged plants should not be cut back until after danger of any further frost. Severe pruning should be avoided during the hot summer months.

5. Dead heading

During blooming, cut off dead blooms on perennials and small shrubs. When the blooming season is done, cut back stems for the next cycle of new growth and bloom. For ornamental grasses, cut each bunch flat, 6 inches from the ground in January or after the blooms have dried.

Reducing the need to prune

1. Plant the right plant in the right place. Select plants with the mature height, width and shape in mind. Don’t try to make a plant fit in an area that is too small. Give it space to grow naturally.
2. Select plants that are low-water-use and well-adapted to our low desert conditions.
3. Water properly to reduce excess growth. Most plants are opportunists and will take-up any extra watering, resulting in overgrowth. Seasonally adjust your watering frequency to reduce the need to prune.
4. Avoid fertilizing too much or too often. It creates excess growth. Many of our desert-adapted plants do not require any fertilizing at all.

References

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