

The Master Pruner

By Scott Holland

What I will attempt to accomplish is to describe a way of thinking used by a Master Pruner. One who knows how to reinvigorate plants and bend them to his will. That “will” of course being what is best for the plant. It is the middle path taken between being overly timid and not doing what is necessary for health and beauty of the plant and the other side of being overly aggressive which results in needless destruction. I have been in the horticulture industry for over 25 years, and having seen a lot of pruning done both good and bad, I have noticed an effective pattern of approach that every Master Pruner takes to bring out the best in a tree or shrub. This also involves the area of aesthetics i.e., knowing and creating what is visually appealing. The Master Pruner moves easily, cuts decisively, and operates on instinct. It is to these great people, who often work in anonymity, that this book is dedicated.



Chapter 1

On Being Decisive



You're it. A plant cannot prune itself, at least in the short term. In nature, plants prune themselves all the time; but, this takes a long time as shade and nature take its course. Shaded limbs eventually fall off. So why prune?

A garden is not undisturbed nature. A limb can get diseased, or get broken, by wind, or the weight of snow. So you're it. You fix the problem. You're the pruner. In every beginning pruning class there is always the 3D lecture i.e., the removal of **dead**, **diseased** and **damaged** limbs.

The pruner removes these first. This is where the confidence necessary to complete the job begins. Once you get into the plant, and as you begin removing, you begin to see how the plant has responded to its individual environment. You have learned the essence of the plant and can begin to make the right decisions – which limbs to remove to accentuate its appearance.

Maybe the plant is too thick in some areas. Too busy. Some thinning cuts are required. If a limb is sticking into the walkway, it will need to be removed or shortened with a heading cut. Also, the decision has to be made as to how long you can stay in one spot and when to move. This way, you will avoid taking too much off in one area. Once the decision is made, make it, and move on.



Chapter 2

Humility



A plant cannot move. The limbs can grow and the roots can grow; but, the plant itself just can't pick up and move to another spot in the yard. It just sits there exposed to the elements. It can also be a home for wildlife. As any birds nest will attest. A Master Pruner is humble and empathetic. If I were to devise a final exam for new pruners, outside the written and hands on, it would involve no use of tools at all. You would have to stand in front of a tree or shrub for four hours. To have empathy, one must have a common frame of reference. I remember years ago during Marine boot I had to stand at the position of attention for several inspections. One battalion commander's inspection lasted several hours. If you have an itch somewhere or a fly lands on your ear, you can't move. Good empathy training.

Chapter 3

When pruning, we must remove limbs.

If you are afraid of hurting a plant, get over it. While it is true that pruning wounds a plant, as a general rule of thumb with some exceptions, you are safe removing $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ of a plant's canopy. The best way to overcome any fear of pruning is to answer the following w's – What? When? Why? What is the plant? When do you prune it? Why do you need to prune it? Self-educate first. Prune second. Always start by dead wooding. The way to tell is to bend a branch. If it snaps easily, it is dead. Take the time to remove dead wood thoroughly. It does not hurt the plant and it is the best way to gain confidence. You also get the "feel" for the plant. You connect with how the plant is responding to its environment and prune to accentuate the plant's response. You are there to facilitate – not dominate.



Chapter 4

Gung Ho!

Once you have identified what must be done, have at it. The overgrown is not going to get smaller by looking at it. The thoughtful pruner at first will always be on the cautious side. This is understandable. Once a limb is removed, it cannot be glued back on. This is why it is always best to begin pruning by removing the deadwood first. You start getting the feel of the plant as your confidence grows. Often times, pruning out the deadwood is enough. Start by knowing the basics. Go from simple to complex. Remember, you are in command. Sometimes, it is necessary to severely cut back a poorly developed shrub in order to save it.

Chapter 5

The Soul is the best equipment.

What do you see, hear, and feel? The dead wood has been removed. Other necessary cuts have been made e.g., cutting back the limb rubbing against the window. Now the creative work begins. You have the feel of the plant. You connect with how it is responding to its natural environment. This is pruning at its essence. You are a living thing assisting another living thing., a plant, to look better, grow better, and survive better. A plant will respond a certain way to its environment. You are not there to impose your will; for, that will ultimately fail. The plant will simply grow back the same way. The best approach is to accentuate what the plant is already doing. Remember. You get to move. A plant has to stay there and take it. Better to assist.



Chapter 6

Aesthetics

It has been said that a plant does not care how it looks. It just wants to survive. So why does aesthetics matter? Well I go back to the old adage: "Man does not live by bread alone". Is a beautifully pruned plant any different from a sculpture, painting, or piece of music? We appreciate these things to take the hard edge off life. Otherwise, we are nothing more than animals who eat, sleep, and reproduce. Art work is an extension of our own civilization – an aspiration to something higher. It is an extension of our own beauty, grace, and knowledge.

So what is a well pruned plant with attention to detail and aesthetics? My conclusion of course is subjective and arbitrary. That being said, I believe I am close to a universal standard.. The plant has a graceful form with every space filled. At the same time there is a sense of definition with space for air flow. Regarding branch structure, we reach for a balance between course, medium, and fine e.g., trunk, scaffold, and finer branches. When the work is done, the plant appears as if nobody touched it.



Chapter 7

Education

Confidence builder. Start with identifying the plant. One way is to take a cutting to a local nursery or county extension agent. Once identified, you can look up the plant on the internet. Regarding written material, my favorite authors are Christopher Brickell and Cass Turnbull. Written material from county extension is also helpful. Don't underestimate education. I once worked for an employer who remarked: "A real guy does not waste time reading books. He just does it". Well, I have spent a career correcting the previous work of "real guys" who went out and just (screwed up) did it.

Education anyone? Enough said.



Chapter 8

Get in there.

Time for action. Time to move, prune, step back, (turn around) move, and prune again. One basic rule of thumb is to work from the inside out. This the best way to get the know or get the feel of a plant. It often means getting on your knees (with knee pads) and getting out the fallen leaves, twigs, and deadwood. Through the pruning process, it is important not to stay in one place for too long. Otherwise, more wood than necessary will be taken out causing an imbalance.

As you move in and out of a plant, take a look, move around, and you will see the plant from a different perspective. For a professional pruner, what should look good is that perspective that will be seen the most e.g., through the living room or kitchen window.

Finally, the issue of timing regarding creativity should be considered. If you feel tired or flat, stop and move to another activity. The plant will always be there and you can come back when your mind is fresh. Pruning involves some big decisions and it is best not to make these when you are tired. (true in life as well). The plant deserves your sustained creativity.

Chapter 9

For The Professional

The important thing to remember is not to skip dead wooding. It is tempting to do to make the bid competitive; but, don't do it. The reason is that these short cuts inevitably reduce the quality mindset. Getting the "feel" for the plant requires some time investment. My own personal experience is that your prospective client will pay more for quality work – especially if you have a reputation for it. Also, you will enjoy the work more as you follow the job from its projection and inception on to its completion. Enjoying the work often involves what professional athletes call " getting in the zone". What this means is you derive joy from the process rather than so much the end result. You get into the flow. This requires an approach of non- ego attachment – the anonymous artist. This is not going to happen every time; but, your chances will increase as you cultivate the qualities of curiosity, humility, and persistence. It is worth the effort. Happy pruning.

Conclusion

The mind of a Master Pruner is similar to that of a Master Sculptor. It is a process of knowing what, how much, and when to remove. The key is to strike that balance between removing too much or too little. This is the ultimate challenge of pruning. Like a professional athlete, it's mastery requires total dedication. What we create is ultimately an extension of what we are inside.

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