

Tree & Shrub Pruning — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into action in your own yard. Each section pairs with a course module and asks you to inventory your real plants, plan species-correct timing, and practice cuts deliberately. Work through it with a notebook, your tools, and one plant at a time, and keep the templates as a living record you update every season.

How Plants Respond to the Cut

Train your eye to read branch anatomy and to choose between heading and thinning before you ever make a cut.

Exercise: Read the Collar on Five Branches

Go to any tree or shrub in your yard and find five branches of different sizes. On each, locate the branch collar and the branch bark ridge before deciding anything. Sketch or photograph each one and mark with an arrow exactly where the final cut would go, just outside the collar. Do not cut yet; this is an observation exercise.

- On which branch was the collar hardest to see, and what made it clear once you looked closely?

- Where would a flush cut have fallen on each branch, and how much extra trunk tissue would it have removed?

- Did any branch have a stub from a previous cut, and what condition is that old wound in now?

Worksheet: Heading vs Thinning Decision Log

Pick three cuts you are considering anywhere in your garden. For each, fill in the row to force yourself to name the goal and pick the correct cut type before acting. Leave the outcome column blank until you have made the cut and seen the response.

Plant name

Branch or stem described

Goal (health / structure / size)

Cut type chosen (heading / thinning / reduction)

Bud direction or origin point

Expected response

Actual response observed later

Checklist: Before Every Cut Pre-Flight

- I can name the specific goal this cut serves
- I have located the branch collar and bark ridge
- I have decided whether this is a heading or thinning cut
- For a heading cut, I am cutting to an outward-facing bud
- I am not making a flush cut or leaving a stub
- This cut keeps total canopy removal under 25 percent for the year

Tools, Sharpening, and Hygiene

Match tools to branch sizes, drill the three-cut method, and build a maintenance and disinfection habit.

Worksheet: Tool-to-Diameter Audit

List every cutting tool you own. For each, record its rated maximum diameter and note whether it is bypass or anvil. Then walk your yard and confirm you own the right tool for the largest branch you realistically need to cut. Flag any gap.

Tool name and model

Action type (bypass / anvil)

Rated maximum branch diameter

Current edge condition (sharp / dull / damaged)

Largest branch I need this tool for

Gap or replacement needed

Exercise: Practice the Three-Cut Method

Find one limb 5 cm or thicker that genuinely needs removing, or use a heavy fallen branch propped horizontally for practice. Perform the undercut, the top cut, and the final collar cut in that order, narrating each step aloud. Inspect the result for any bark tearing.

- Where exactly did you place the undercut, and how deep did you go before stopping?

- When the limb fell on the top cut, did the bark tear, and did it stop at the undercut as intended?

- How clean and round is the final collar wound, and would you change your cut placement next time?

Checklist: End-of-Day Tool Care Routine

- Wiped sap and grime off every blade
- Sharpened the bevel side only at the factory angle
- Removed the burr with one flat pass on the back
- Disinfected blades that touched diseased wood with 70 percent alcohol
- Oiled the pivot and metal surfaces
- Stored tools dry and hung, not in a damp corner

Timing by Species and Plant Type

Classify each plant by bloom timing and bleeding behavior, then commit it to a personal calendar.

Worksheet: Plant Timing Classification

Inventory the trees and shrubs you intend to prune. For each, record when it blooms and use the spring-bloomer rule to assign its correct pruning window. Mark known bleeders separately so you remember to wait for full leaf.

Plant name

When it blooms (spring / summer / fall / non-flowering)

Blooms on old wood or new wood

Is it a bleeder (maple, birch, walnut, elm, grape)?

Correct pruning window

Notes on this specific plant

Exercise: Diagnose a Mistimed Pruning

Think of a flowering shrub that disappointed you, or imagine a neighbor's lilac that never blooms. Using the bloom-timing rule, work out what likely went wrong and write the corrected timing you would use going forward.

- Does the plant bloom on old wood or new wood, and how does that explain the missing flowers?
 - What month and trigger event (after bloom, before bud swell) is the correct window for it?
 - How would you confirm the right timing if you were unsure of the species?
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Checklist: Seasonal Timing Guardrails

- Major structural cuts are scheduled for late dormancy before bud swell
- Spring bloomers are slotted for right after their flowers fade
- Summer-blooming shrubs are slotted for late winter
- Bleeders are deferred to full leaf or late autumn
- No major pruning is planned for fall
- Dead, damaged, and diseased wood is flagged for removal in any season

Fruit Trees, Hedges, and Working Safely

Plan a fruit tree's framework, set a hedge or renovation strategy, and lock in your safety limits before going overhead.

Worksheet: Fruit Tree Training Plan

For each fruit tree you have or plan to plant, choose a training system based on its fruit and record the scaffold structure you are building toward. Track this across years as the framework develops.

Fruit tree species

Training system (central leader / open center / espalier)

Number of scaffold branches kept

Approximate crotch angles

Target finished height

Next cut to make this season

Exercise: Plan a Hedge Taper or Shrub Renovation

Choose one formal hedge to re-shape with a proper batter, or one overgrown shrub to renovate. Decide your approach and write the multi-year plan, confirming first that the plant tolerates the cuts you intend.

- For the hedge, how much wider is the base than the top in your planned taper, and how will you guide a straight top?

- For the shrub, will you use gradual one-third renewal over three years or a single hard cut, and why?

- Does this species resprout from old wood, or is it a conifer that will not, and how does that change your plan?

Checklist: Overhead Work Go or No-Go

- I have surveyed for power lines and no limb is within 3 meters of one
- I am wearing eye protection and a helmet for overhead work
- I am reaching high limbs with a pole tool rather than climbing where possible
- Any ladder is set against a solid trunk with three points of contact
- I am not operating a chainsaw above shoulder height or from a ladder
- I have called a certified arborist for any line-adjacent or property-threatening limb

Your Action Plan

1. Walk your whole property and inventory every tree and shrub you intend to prune into the Plant Pruning Register template.
2. For each plant, classify its bloom timing and bleeding behavior and assign its correct pruning window.
3. Audit your tools against the branch diameters you actually face and buy or replace anything missing, prioritizing quality bypass pruners and a folding pruning saw.
4. Sharpen, clean, and oil every tool, and assemble a small field kit with alcohol wipes for disinfection.
5. Remove all dead, damaged, and diseased wood across the property first, regardless of season, using the three-cut method on anything heavy.
6. Make structural cuts on deciduous shade and fruit trees during the next late-dormant window before buds swell.
7. Prune each spring-flowering shrub within two weeks after its blooms fade, and each summer bloomer in late winter.
8. Train every young fruit tree to its chosen system and record the scaffolds in the Fruit Tree Training Plan.
9. Set a calendar reminder for an early-summer pass to remove water sprouts and trim hedges, and a late-summer hedge tidy.
10. Review your Pruning Activity Log at the end of the year, noting what regrew well and what you would time or cut differently next season.

