

Selecting the Right Pruning Tools for Each Task

by Rita Pelczar

AS LEE REICH mentions in “Pruning Deciduous Shrubs” (page 36), pruning involves a certain amount of artistry. Quality tools that match the job are imperative to maximize that artistry and minimize both plant trauma and gardener fatigue. Select your tools for each job based on the size of the branches or stems that need cutting. Too small a tool makes your work harder, can leave jagged cuts that provide openings for diseases and pests, and may damage your tool. Never twist your pruners to complete a cut, and keep the blades of your pruning tools sharp (see “Maintaining a Sharp Edge,” page 50).

HAND PRUNERS AND SNIPS

Hand pruners, also called hand shears or secateurs, are generally used for cutting branches up to three-quarter-inch in diameter. They get a lot of use, so it’s worth investing in a good pair. There are two types based on their blades: anvil and bypass. **Anvil pruners** have a single blade that cuts against a flat opposing surface. Use this type for cutting up dead branches or culling unwanted vines or saplings because it can crush stems in the process—something you want to avoid when pruning garden plants. The action of **bypass pruners** is more like scissors—one blade passes the other, creating a much cleaner, sharper cut. This is a better choice for tending the plants in your landscape.

Some pruners offer ratchet action, whereby the cut is made in increments with small, repeated squeezes that require less strength. **Country Home Products** offers sturdy, well balanced ratchet hand pruners capable of cutting through branches that are up to one inch thick. Its high carbon steel bypass blades with their non-stick coating retain their edge over a long period of use.

PowerGear® bypass pruners from Fiskars have won several design awards, including the Ease of Use Commendation from the Arthritis Foundation®, and for good reason: They are comfortable,

lightweight, and the handle rotates as you squeeze it, engaging gears that minimize the hand strength required. An adjustment screw allows you to modify the grip to fit your hand. **Corona’s Ergo-Action** bypass pruners are also designed to



Country Home’s ratchet hand pruners

reduce hand stress. Their angled blade and contoured handles are comfortable, even with extended use. **Felco pruners**, both anvil and bypass styles, come in a variety of sizes and are available for either right- or left-handed gardeners.

To extend your reach, long arm pruners look like hand pruners on a pole. These may have fixed poles with a reach of two to four feet, or telescoping poles that extend their reach up to 10 feet or so. I find that this type of pruners has somewhat limited applications and it is hard to use for long without causing fatigue.

However, it can be indispensable for pruning those hard-to-reach stems or otherwise inaccessible flowers for indoor arrangements.

A bit pricier than many hand pruners, the **Leatherman Genus**® is actually a very compact and practical garden tool kit. If you rotate the ergonomically designed handle of the bypass pruners, you can access a knife, Phillips screwdriver, sprinkler head adjustment tool/flat screwdriver, bottle opener, and a saw. All the tools are stainless steel and the body is anodized aluminum. The tool also comes with a diamond-coated file that doubles as a handy open-end wrench for adjusting the pruner nut.



Leatherman Genus pruners and tool kit

Snips and garden scissors are great for more delicate chores such as deadheading flowers, pruning herbaceous vines and stems, or harvesting fresh flowers and herbs. **OXO Good Grips**® garden scissors have serrated, stainless steel blades and a comfortable padded grip. **Softouch**® **Micro-Tip**® pruning snips from Fiskars with their padded handles are another good option for finely detailed pruning work. And Felco’s **fruit**

vegetable harvesting shear (F310) is the perfect tool for harvesting grapes.

LOPPERS AND POLE PRUNERS

Pruning loppers are similar to hand pruners, just bigger. Like hand pruners, they are available in anvil or bypass styles, and some offer ratchet action. Since loppers are gripped with two hands instead of one, the muscles in both arms are engaged, providing significantly more leverage. Loppers are useful for cutting branches from three-quarters to two inches in diameter. For maximum strength and control, cut the branch as far back in the blade opening (close to the pivot) as possible.

Short handled loppers—16 to 18 inches long—are great for close in work such as renewal pruning shrubs or pruning grapes. Longer handles—usually between 20 and 36 inches—extend your reach for overhead cuts or hard-to-reach spots. Some loppers have telescoping handles, which provide a range of handle lengths in a single tool. For example, the handles of Corona's **Compound Action Bypass Loppers** extend from 21 to 33 inches.



Loppers, like this one from Fiskars, are designed to cut branches up to two inches thick.

The ratcheting mechanism of Garrett-Wade's **Premium Grade Pruning Loppers** extends the typical limit of lopper cuts with a cutting jaw capacity of two-and-a-half inches. This tool is equipped with Teflon® blades and telescoping handles, which extend from 26 to 40 inches. The rubber grips provide stability.

Pole pruners are used to reach branches that are beyond the reach of loppers. They consist of a long pole with a hooked upper blade and a cutting blade below that is operated with a rope. Some are equipped with a telescoping pole. Exercise caution when using a pole pruner or any other pruning tool to cut overhead branches;


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MAINTAINING A SHARP EDGE

For clean cuts, sharpen your pruning tools regularly following these simple steps:

- Disassemble the tool (usually just a matter of removing a single screw).
- Using a soft rag and 3-in-1 oil or a lubricant specifically made for cleaning gardening tools such as Felco's Universal Lubricant Spray, wipe down all parts of the tool, removing dirt and plant debris; use steel wool to remove rust.
- Use a sharpening stone to remove nicks and restore a sharp edge to the blade. Hold the sharpening stone against the cutting blade at a slight angle and push the stone across the blade (away from you) along the entire length of the bevel. Sharpen in one direction only, beginning with the coarse side of the stone and finishing with the fine side.
- Although pruner blades are beveled only on one side, run the sharpening stone over the non-beveled side a few times to remove rough edges.
- Oil or grease all moving parts and reassemble tool.
- To refresh your blade's edge quickly, without disassembling the tool, Lee Valley offers a sharpener, pictured above, that adjusts to any size pruning blade.



Lee Valley's sharpener for pruners

—R.P.

branches can fall on and injure the operator below. And, of course, always check for overhead powerlines, too.

PRUNING SAWS

Pruning saws are required for branches that are too large for loppers or pole pruners. They may be fixed or folding and are designed to cut on the back stroke. Their blade is typically curved, with widely spaced teeth that help prevent binding in fresh wood.

The blades of **Bahco hand saws** range from seven-and-one-half to 11 inches; some are folding and are equipped with a



Felco curved hand saw

For hard-to-reach branches, **Orchard's Edge** offers several pole saws with telescoping handles that, depending on the saw, can be extended from 12 to 21 feet.



Bahco's hand saw folds for easy storage.

SPECIALTY PRUNERS

Certain pruning chores are easier with tools designed for the plant. Vineyard loppers, for example, have hooked bypass blades that hold the vine while it's being cut.

Rose growers may appreciate **Lee Valley's Snip & Strip Rose Pruners**. The hand-held snips have a three-inch blade for pruning canes and cutting stems, and a notch toward the tip of the blade for removing thorns. The American Rose Society has endorsed Fiskars's **Super Light PowerGear® Loppers**, which are compact, lightweight, and powerful enough

Sources

- Cactus Pruner**, www.cactuspruner.com.
- Corona**, www.coronaclipper.com.
- Country Home Products, Inc.**, www.countryhomeproducts.com.
- Fiskars**, www.fiskars.com.
- Gardener's Supply**, www.gardeners.com.
- Gardenscape Tools**, www.gardenscapetools.com.
- Garrett Wade Outdoor Tools**, www.garrettwade.com/Outdoor-Tools/c/12375.
- Lee Valley Garden Tools**, www.leevalley.com.
- Orchard's Edge**, www.orchardsedge.com.
- Rittenhouse Garden Tools**, www.rittenhouse.ca.

to cut through rose branches up to one-and-a-quarter-inch thick.

Cacti and succulents require pruning equipment that accommodates their thick, non-woody, and often spiny stems. A **Cactus Saw**, for example, has an angled, serrated blade and a long handle that keeps your hand away from the cactus itself. A **Cactus Whacker** is designed for smaller cacti and succulents and for more detailed pruning. If you really need to grasp the stem of your cactus, you will want to invest in a **Cactus Gripper** or **Cactus Grabber**. All of the above mentioned tools for cactus are available from Cactus Pruner (see "Sources," above).



Cactus Whacker

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