

With all of the jobs that there are to be done in the garden in the fall, I used to receive many calls about pruning every September at the garden centre.

Between planting fall bulbs, salvaging the last buckets of tomatoes from the vegetable garden, sowing a cover crop of fall rye, picking grapes, edging borders, pulling weeds and dividing perennials, pruning hasn't even crossed my mind when I've been out enjoying the sunshine.

But I seem to be in the minority, because we fielded so many phone calls about fall pruning at the garden centre. Pruning is the most misunderstood of all gardening practices, not only in terms of how, but also when. To help clear up some of the confusion here's the word on pruning in the fall.

Evergreens like junipers and cedar hedges should not be pruned at this time of the year. The time for that has passed about two months ago, or even earlier in spring before the new growth has begun.

The reason relates to our often erratic fall weather. Pruning always encourages growth, no matter whether it's done in spring, summer or fall. Sometimes we revel in beautiful autumn weather, and such weather encourages new growth. This growth is at risk if we have an early onset of cold weather, which also tends to happen from time to time, because it won't have time to mature or "harden off" before winter hits. Save this job for March or April.

Deciduous shrubs and trees should really be left alone at this time as well. Early bloomers like forsythia are already forming flower buds for next spring, pruning now will remove those buds, and if forsythia isn't blooming strongly in spring what good is it?

I saw an instance recently of a Norway Maple which had been pruned so hard last October, removing a good percentage of its top growth, that it never leafed out in the spring. If a branch really is out of place and rubbing up against the house in the wind for example, then remove it. Save the main pruning, though, for a sunny day in February or March when you're just itching to get out there into the yard.

Many gardeners with roses do some pruning on these shrubs in the fall. There is no real benefit to this, but some shortening of longer canes is in order if there is danger of them being damaged by winter winds. Roses should not be pruned hard before winter, as this leaves no allowance for the pruning that Mother Nature sometimes does for us during a cold winter. When she prunes, she doesn't mess around!

Clean the accumulated sap off your pruners, get them sharpened and spray them with oil. Put them away for the winter but keep them close by. When the first warm days of the late winter beckon you'll want them outside with you.