



PRUNING TOOLS

Dr. Leonard Perry, Horticulture Professor Emeritus
University of Vermont

Whether you're looking for gifts for a gardener (or yourself), are doing dormant winter pruning of shrubs and trees, or pruning shrubs and shearing hedges in late spring through early summer, having the proper pruning tools for the job will make it go much easier and quicker, with less plant damage.

The first tool every gardener should have is a good pair of hand pruners. There are many types, so you may end up with more than one. You'll often get what you pay for, so if you buy very inexpensive pruners they may only last a year or two, and won't be able to be sharpened, and may be difficult to use. If budget is a consideration, and you do little pruning, cheap ones may suffice. Better, more expensive pruners can be sharpened as needed or have blades replaced, they have more durable locks and springs, are easier on hands, and they have a "bumper" between the handles. Good quality pruners will last many years, perhaps a lifetime.

There are two basic types—bypass and anvil pruners. Bypass ones have blades that pass by each other—like scissors—so make clean cuts and don't damage plant tissue, as anvil pruners might. These latter have a blade that presses against a solid surface to make the cut. These are best for dead branches and plants, where plant stem injury isn't a concern.

The smallest and a good choice for cutting flower stems, deadheading flowers, and pruning seedlings are those with small narrow blades, often only two-inches long, sometimes referred to as micro-tip.

Then there are hand pruners with cushioned grips, easier on the hands. Ergonomic pruners have a handle that swivels—sometimes hard to get used to but very useful if you have weak hands or arthritis. Ratchet pruners (those that cut in several steps) or those with a power-cut design make cutting thick stems easier. Most pruners are designed for right-handed use, but a few work for either hand, and some are designed just for left-handed gardeners.

Hand pruners are good to cut branches up to about 3/4-inch wide (some advertise to one-inch), but for larger branches you'll want a pair of loppers. Again, look for similar features as in good hand pruners. In addition, look at the handle length—they vary from 18 inches to 32 inches usually. A general good range is about 24 to 28 inches. These longer handles both provide more leverage when cutting branches up to one and a half inches, and enable you to reach higher and farther into plants. Make sure to consider the composition, and so weight, of the handles. Even a pound or so extra weight can make a difference when doing lots of pruning. Steel handles tend to be the heaviest, aluminum the lightest.

Loppers also come with ratchet or power-assist features, as with hand pruners. Make sure to read reviews on whether some of these designs actually work, and don't break. If you want loppers of various lengths for various types of pruning, you can find ones with telescoping handles. Read reviews to make sure with these that the latching mechanism actually holds.

If you have even larger branches than an inch and a half or two inches wide, you'll need a pruning saw. You can get various ones in different lengths, straight or curved blade, bow design, or folding. I like to have a good

folding saw that opens to about an 8-inch blade. This is easy to carry around with your other garden tools. I also have a good quality hand saw with ergonomic curved handle, and curved blade—15 to 18 inches long is a standard length for these. Usually saws have teeth pointing backward, so the sawing gets done on the pull rather than the push.

You can get saws on extendable poles for branches higher than the usual reach. Some of these also have a bypass pruner on the end too, operated with a cord or lever. You even can get a small 8-inch or so chain saw—gas or battery powered (I have the latter)—on an extending pole. Just make sure when getting into such power equipment to know what you are doing, use the right protective gear, and know how to maintain the equipment. This applies as well to regular chain saws which can cause serious injury, even death, if used improperly even just once.

All these tools so far relate to pruning, rather than shearing. Sometimes you'll see the hand pruners called hand shears, which is confusing, as they prune but don't shear plants. To "shear" is to uniformly shape, to cut off large amounts with one cut and without considering the plant branch structure. For shearing, you'll want a pair of hedge clippers or shears. These resemble large scissors, the handle and blades usually around 24 inches long. Some traits to look for in these again are weight (if you have lots to shear), cushioned grips, rubber bumpers near where the handles and blades join (to cushion each cut), and good quality blades. Some, as with pruners, have power assist features to make cutting easier.

If you have lots of hedge or plants to shear, consider a gas, electric, or battery-powered pair of shears. If the latter, as with other battery tools, make sure the battery is of good quality and sufficient power to last for your projects and to not need continual charging. It helps with such tools to get a spare battery or two, so you'll always have one charged when needed.

So if all this sounds daunting, just match the right tools for your projects. At the least, gardeners usually find it useful to have a good pair of bypass hand pruners, a lopper (a telescoping one is useful for many jobs), and a good hand saw—folding is good to have, but a longer curved blade one is more useful overall.

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