



“Prune like a Pro!” 2021

Forsythia (Forsythia)

TITLE: Forsythia shrubs (*Forsythia x intermedia*) with their bright yellow flowers are a hallmark of spring.

Description: The most attractive forsythias are those managed to enhance their natural growth habit of slender branches that grow upward and outward, making a natural “spray”. Branches, while stiff, will arch down to earth under the weight of spring flowers.

Objective(s): Learn how to prune a forsythia to maintain their upright-arching stems.

WHAT: Never shear a forsythia! Shearing may be faster, but branches will respond by putting out excessive, dense brushy growth at the stem tips, giving it a very unnatural look.

WHY: Being a cane shrub, Forsythia generates many new canes each year. Left unpruned, Forsythia will become very dense, and unruly -- with only a few slender flowering branches contorting themselves to reach sunlight from inside a tangle of old woody stems.

WHEN: For the first several years, Forsythias will need little pruning. After that, they should be pruned annually. Forsythias bloom on “old wood”, and should be pruned as soon as they finish flowering. They start developing next year’s flower buds in early to mid-summer; so, do not wait until fall to prune or you will be removing next year’s flower buds.

WHERE: Forsythias grow in a wide range of hardiness zones and do well in east TN. Growth habits vary from shrubs that reach 10’ (height and width) to dwarf and compact forms more suited to small gardens. To bloom their best, they need to be planted in full sun.

HOW:

- Selectively removing one-fourth to one-third of the oldest stems. These stems will have the largest diameter, and as they thicken with age, will rub against one another in the interior of the shrub, creating wounds. Strategically remove the oldest stems to eliminate this rubbing.
- Thin out congested branches in the canopy. This is done by cutting a branch off at its point of origin on a main stem.
- Remove the 4 D’s: dead, damaged, diseased, and dysfunctional (e.g., growing inward, “moonshots”)
- Forsythia pruning can be done with hand pruners or loppers. Make each cut right above the branch collar (the ring of wrinkled bark where a branch originates from a larger stem).
- Continue thinning out branches until you have created an open, airy plant canopy. The open habit will allow light into the center of the shrub, stimulating sturdy new shoots to emerge from the crown and remaining stems. It may look “thin” when you finish, but next spring it will be full again.
- Resist the temptation to give forsythia a “haircut”. If you need to reduce the height or width, cut those long branches off deep within the shrub, at a main stem.
- If you have acquired property with neglected forsythias, you can renovate them by cutting back to within a foot of the crown during late winter (while dormant).

SUMMARY OF IMPORTANT POINTS:

- Forsythias are a cane shrub and should NEVER be pruned with hedge trimmers. Resist the temptation to give them a “haircut”. It is not their nature, and it will look unnatural.
- Forsythias bloom on old wood, and should be pruned as soon as they finish flowering.
- Start at the base and remove the largest, oldest stems (up to ¼ to 1/3 of the total stems)
- Thin the canopy by trimming branches back to a main stem
- Remove the 4 D’s.
- Continue thinning until the shrub is open and airy. The real test: could you toss a tennis ball through the shrub??
- After pruning, new growth will be fast and furious.
- Renovation pruning is drastic, but effective: cut within one foot of the crown while dormant
- If any tips from the prior year contacted the soil, they might have “tip rooted”. Congratulations! You just propagated another forsythia. Did it up and plant it, plant it in a new location, or give it to a friend.

Additional Resources / References:

“Best Management Practices for Pruning Landscape Trees, Shrubs and Ground Covers”, University of TN publication 1619, <https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/documents/pb1619.pdf>

“Pruning Forsythias in Maine”, Maine Cooperative Extension Bulletin #2513, <https://extension.umaine.edu/publications/2513e/>

“Pruning Forsythias”, University of Arkansas Extension, <https://www.uaex.edu/yard-garden/resource-library/plant-week/pruning-forsythia-04-10-2015.aspx>

“Yard and Garden: Forsythia”, University of Iowa Extension, <https://www.extension.iastate.edu/news/yard-and-garden-forsythia>

Knox County Master Gardeners website: www.knoxcountymastergardener.org

Knox County Master Gardeners Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/KnoxCountyMG>

Ask-a-Master Gardener / Knox County Extension Helpline: (865) 215-2340

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