

This week's column is dedicated to new and old gardeners and everyone in between. My motto is "everyone can become a gardener." In today's column we'll touch on a bouquet of perhaps unrelated topics but all about the pleasures and quandries of gardening.

To Prune or Not to Prune, That is the Question – There are four main reasons to prune: to train a plant, to maintain plant health, to improve the quality of flowers, fruit, foliage or stems, and to restrict growth. But before you get out those shears, loppers or pruners heed these words from Ernie Linger, "Take a chair outside, sit down and look at the tree or bush for at least half an hour with your tools still in the garage or shed." In other words, "Don't rush into it."

To learn about pruning find a class through one of our community schools, parks and recreation, or at one of the nurseries or garden centers. Contact the County Extension Office at 337-7157 for free advice and low cost booklets on pruning. One task you can easily do without harming any plant is to remove dead, dying, rubbing and crossing twigs and limbs. Make your cuts close to the branch or trunk where it's attached. Be sure your tools are sharp and clean. The best book I've seen (and read) so far on pruning is by Cass Turnbull called, "Landscape Design, Renovation and Maintenance," ISBN 1-55870-208-3, at \$14.95 by Betterway Publications.

Finally, on the subject of pruning, here are some "Don'ts." Never top a tree (you'll end up with two tops or, worse yet, it will rot down the middle). Avoid pruning in fall and winter because it's often hard to distinguish dead from dormant wood. And, try not to rush the pruning. (Little by little is better. Go slowly and cautiously.)

Bulbs, Hydrangeas, Lilacs – When any of your bulbs finish blooming this year, cut off the stem with the dead flowers on it. Then let the other greenery die back naturally. It's this greenery that will nourish, energize and fatten up the bulb for next year's growth of new flowers and foliage. After the foliage is brown and dry you can trim it off and compost it. Don't eagerly and efficiently prune back your hydrangeas and lilacs at this time of year. They have already set their blooms for this year. Hydrangea and lilac blooms sprout out of the old wood. (You can clip off the dry dead flowers though.) If you've already trimmed plants back, don't despair, there's always next year. Also be patient with your lilacs and hydrangeas if they haven't bloomed yet, it often takes five years for them to do so.

New or Timid Gardeners – I have had the pleasure to meet so many gardeners. Each one teaches me something new and valuable. Even gardeners who think they don't know anything have given me gifts of wisdom or a new way of looking at the experience of gardening. I want to encourage each and every one who has wished they could garden to just get out there and do it. Don't be afraid. It's only a plant and some soil (also known as dirt). Every gardener starts by planting a seed or a plant. Every gardener has failures. Don't be sad or discouraged; when plants die they become mulch for next year's garden. Failures are learning experiences.

Peas and Sweet Peas – A wise woman who forgot to tell me her name told me her secret of growing peas and sweet peas. She pre-sprouts her seeds. It's a tip passed on to her from a gardener friend and she says it works every time. You can sprout the seeds by soaking them in a small bit of water for about two days. You can also sprout them between two moist paper towels. Then plant them outside in your garden. Sometimes she even starts the pre-sprouted seeds in peat pots or expandable peat disks. After sprouting on a sunny windowsill or under lights she waits until the plants have four leaves each. At that point she puts the plants out into her garden. This method works for her every time. I'm definitely going to try it myself.

In Memory of Betty Iverson – Finally, last but definitely not least, I want to dedicate this gardening column to a very dear friend who left this earth February 26. Betty loved gardening and was the best weeder (among other things) I've ever met. She left me and many others sadder but so much wiser and enriched by her life. I know she's gardening on a cloud in heaven somewhere. She was a magnificent sunny bloom in our garden of life. Plant some flowers for us Betty.

You can email Peg with your gardening questions or comments at gardenmentor@yahoo.com.