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Pruning Junipers, Arborvitae and Yews

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COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Pruning Junipers, Arborvitae and Yews

Larry Helwig, Extension forester

A woody setting may not be what you had in mind when you set out your evergreens. Evergreens do need periodic pruning. They're too often neglected because too many people haven't the courage to approach them with shears in hand.

Never mind, they will recover after you chop, and you will have stronger and more attractive plants.

Evergreens are grouped according to their growth patterns, and each group requires slightly different pruning procedures. This fact sheet covers trimming of junipers, arborvitae, and yews. Companion fact sheets treat the spruces and firs and the pines. Whatever species you have, start pruning it when it is young, and give it yearly attention.

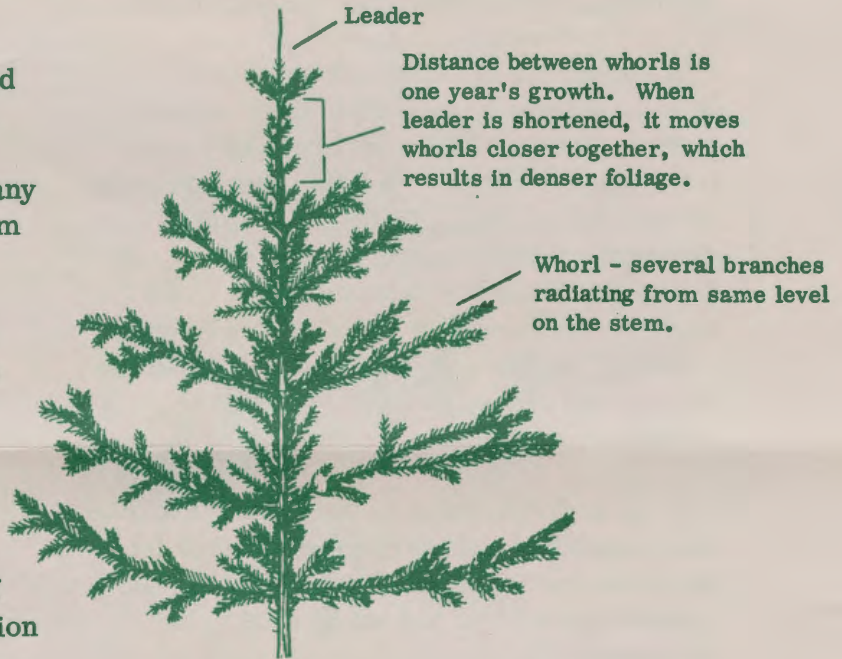
Identify the evergreen first . . .

It belongs in this group if it bears its foliage close to the stem with awl-shaped needles (juniper), tight, flat compressed foliage (arborvita) or dark green, flat needles (yew). All have a berry-like or conelet fruit.

Heavy or light with the shears ?

Junipers, yews, and arborvitae can be pruned harshly, so long as the tiniest bit of green remains on the heavier limbs. They may look victimized for several years, but you can trim them without fretting that you're destroying them.

There are two major methods of trimming. A sheared evergreen is one on which you cut all growing tips off regularly. The plant has a formal, tight appearance.



Sheared

A pruned evergreen is selectively snipped; some individual branches or branchlets are removed periodically. The tree has a more feathery, natural look than a sheared one.

A constantly sheared evergreen will develop a tight 1- to 2-inch crust of green growth outside of a central core of brown but living branches. All tips that you snip off will be visible. If the shell of green is damaged, it takes a longer time for green foliage to cover the damaged area. We don't recommend that you shear individual trees; if you have to, you probably have the wrong kind of tree planted in that particular space.

An evergreen which is only pruned will be more open and will have green foliage from the trunk to the outside branch tips. The pruned tips will be hidden by other branches.

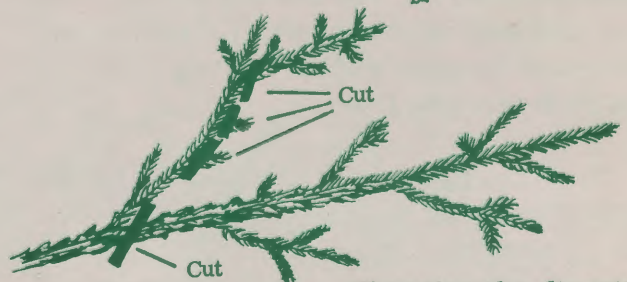
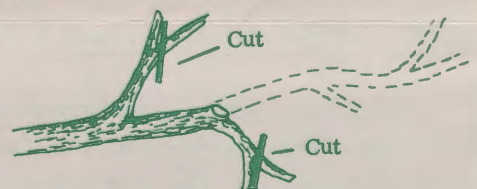
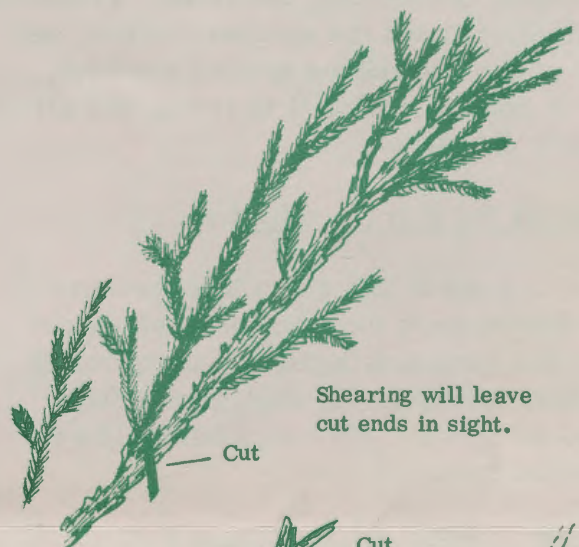
Check your evergreens every year. Spring is the best time to trim junipers, arborvitae, and yews, but timing is not critical. They need to be disciplined. Annual attention is almost a must, or they soon grow out of bounds.

With shears in hand . . .

To limit growth, prune junipers, arborvitae, and yews by the drop-crotch method. Select the branch to be pruned, drop back to a crotch, and cut at the juncture.

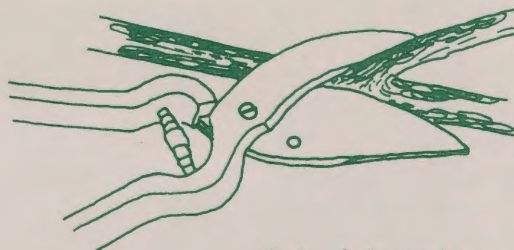
To change the direction a plant is growing, decide which way you want it to take, find a little branch growing on top of the branch you want lopped off, and cut just under it. The little branch will cover the cut end. Cutting at a downward 45° angle will also help hide the stub.

Cut back lateral growth in proportion to the leader to help balance the new design.



Changing the direction of growth

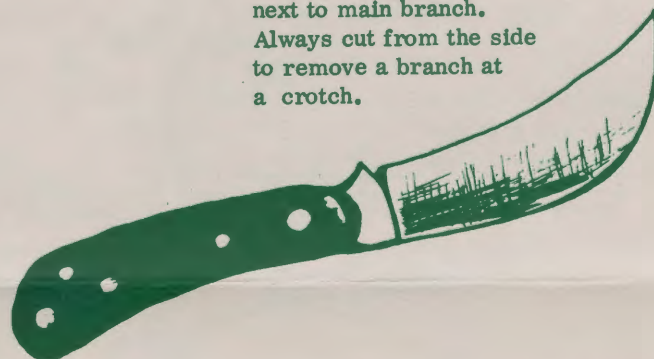
Use a short-handled pruning knife or a shears as illustrated. If you use a shears, keep the flat blade next to the branch.



Blade of shears is next to main branch. Always cut from the side to remove a branch at a crotch.

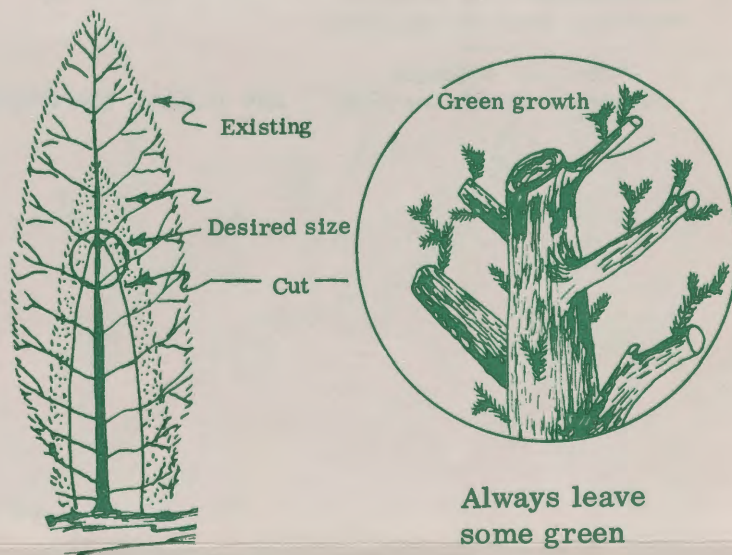
When the plants have been neglected. . .

Drastic pruning is necessary when homeowners forget to provide annual attention to their plants. Following heavy pruning, the plants appear very ragged, but they will recover in time. Remember to always leave some green growth in the remaining branches.



Another plan of attack is to conduct heavy pruning over several years. Prune heavily to open up the crown and encourage the internal green growth to make a start. Prune heavily again in the second and third year, and moderately every following year.

You can cut deep, and cut big. But always leave some green growth. They will survive, and you will have a plant better fitted for its location.



Always leave some green

If an upright has a broken top . . .

An upright evergreen may have lost its top leader; that's not uncommon. Just select the largest lateral nearest the top and gently bend it up and tie to an attached brace. Use cloth ties, and pad with a sponge or cloth. Wire fasteners may girdle the growing tree. Cut back the other lateral branches by about half so that they do not compete with the shoot you have selected.

If the tree's top was broken for some time before you get to it, you may have a double or multiple leader developing. Remove the leaders farthest from the central axis.



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