Late winter is a great time to prune trees and shrubs

Although garden activity in the winter may seem rather dormant compared to the other three seasons of the year, it’s the ideal time to prune most deciduous trees and shrubs. The branches are very easy to see with no leaves on the trees. Another bonus for pruning in late winter is the trees are dormant and will experience less stress than plants pruned during active growth. In addition, most disease agents are inactive, which minimizes the spread of disease.

Before pruning, it is important to make sure your equipment is in good shape. Also, be sure to choose the right tool for the job. There are many different tools available for pruning, and each has a very unique purpose.

Hand pruners and loppers are very similar, differing mainly in size. As the name suggests, hand pruners are small and the entire tool fits easily in the hand. Hand pruners are designed for small jobs and typically used to cut branches up to ¾ of an inch in diameter.

Loppers have longer handles and are designed for cutting larger stems up to 1¾ inches in diameter. Longer handles allow gardeners to reach farther into a tree or shrub and provide leverage to make the cut. Some loppers are designed with a ratchet or geared system to provide even more cutting power.

Both loppers and hand pruners come with two different types of blades, an anvil type blade or a by-pass blade. Anvil blades come together as they cut and are best for pruning dry, dead wood. This type of blade doesn’t cut cleanly through living tissue and can cause peeling or tearing. When pruning living stems, use the bypass style pruner. The two blades move past one another as they cut, much like a pair of scissors, leaving a clean cut.

Another common type of pruner is a hedge shear, featuring long, flat blades and relatively short handles. Shears may be electric or hand powered and are designed for clipping foliage to create a manicured or formal appearance. This pruner isn’t designed for pruning branches.

A pruning saw is needed for larger branches. There are many different types of pruning saws, all of which typically have a handle with a curved cutting blade attached. Pruning saws have a narrow blade and coarse teeth that cut when pulled through the wood.

Pole pruners are used to cut overhead branches that are difficult to reach. They may have a saw or a hooked style lopper, or both. The lopper is used to cut smaller branches and the saw is used for larger branches.
Be careful when pruning overhead. Remember, electricity can flow through tree branches. Many pruning tools also conduct electricity. Never prune a tree or branch that is within 10 feet of a utility line. When a utility line is near, call your local utility company to coordinate pruning.

Also, don’t work directly overhead. When cutting an overhead branch, work from the side and always wear a hard hat and safety glasses. If pruning is needed in a location that cannot be reached with a pole saw, contact a certified arborist.

Chainsaws are often used by professional arborists when cutting large tree branches greater than 3 inches in diameter, but this isn’t the typical tool for the average homeowner. Chainsaws can be extremely dangerous to use and aren’t recommended for home gardeners.

A chainsaw can be useful for cutting fallen or cut limbs into smaller pieces once they are on the ground. Chainsaws should be used only with appropriate safety gear by people who fully understand their operation. In addition to the hard hat and safety goggles, chainsaw operators should wear leather gloves, ear protection, hard-toed shoes and chaps.

Remember, there are many options of pruning equipment from which to choose. Select the proper tool for the job and keep all equipment in good working order. Before pruning, scan the tree or shrub for potential hazards, such as broken limbs or nearby electric wires. Protect yourself by using the proper personal protective gear. When in doubt, call a certified professional arborist.

###