

# Off to a good Start: Selecting and Pruning Young Plants for Our Native Gardens

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In my article "Pruning Natives for Health and Aesthetics in Our California Gardens" in the winter 2006-07 issue of *Manzanita*, I talked about pruning established native trees and shrubs and finding the essence of each species. Also in that issue, Glenn Keator in his article "Plant Growth" talked about how branches form and the effects of apical meristem and natural growth hormones. When you begin to prune a new, young tree or shrub, it helps to have an understanding of the basics of plant growth as well as a plan for and "story" of what you want the plant to look like over time. I often think of the "plan" as the short- and long-term tasks of care and pruning that fulfill the horticultural needs of the plant, and the "story" as the art and vision. Should you choose a plant that you have observed in our California wildlands, you will have additional knowledge about its growth patterns that may provide inspiration for the story.

Proper pruning of young plants either in the ground or in a container en route to the ground can end up saving hours of time down the road. If you intend to keep the tree or shrub in a container, initial pruning is similar, with some caveats, especially in relation to root pruning.

## Guidelines for Selecting a Species—Choosing the Right Plant for the Right Place in the Garden

Thinking about the habit and structure of a plant will help you decide which plants to add and where they should go in the garden. In the spring issue of the *Manzanita*, Glenn Keator, in his article "All About Nursery-bought Plants," talked about plant selection with good advice and tips. When you go shopping for a plant, look critically at the form it has in the container and choose a species that is appropriate for the space where you are placing it. Training the plant early, with its ultimate shape in mind, will save you time and be kinder to the plant. Certain genera, such as *Ceanothus* and *Arctostaphylos*, have tremendous variation in form and size. Species cultivars may have very different growth habits from the straight species with which you are familiar.

Except for oaks, most natives are not readily available in large specimen sizes at nurseries, so you will likely purchase a 1- or 5-gallon plant, perhaps a 15-gallon. Even if you choose a plant that has the initial structure that seems to meet your needs, it still may require structural pruning during the first five years.

It is not within the scope of this article to discuss

propagation and pruning techniques used in nursery production, but the results of those techniques can have significant repercussions for you as the plant's purchaser. Many or most trees and shrubs are not propagated from seed but rather from cuttings. Often the initial stem, what later may become the trunk, is cut to force branching at a certain height. It might not be the height where you want branching or multiple trunks. The cut often causes multiple stems from one junction, which is particularly problematic for trees if left unpruned.

Furthermore, in some nurseries the plants are crowded together, and this also affects the growth pattern. It may be prudent to pass up a plant or even look for a different genus or species if you cannot find a form you like. When selecting a tree, look for one that has not been limbed up. Nurseries often limb up trees to increase height, but that practice creates spindly trees with poor trunk taper. If you are seeking a focal point or specimen tree, usually a 24-inch box or larger, you can order a low branching or multitrunk tree if you do not see one in the nursery yard. These large trees and shrubs are usually not available at small native nurseries or botanic garden sales.

## Placing the Plant

Placing the plant in the landscape sets the tone for the next 5, 50, or 100 years for the plant and your garden. Two aspects of placement require your careful consideration: what is the front of the plant, that is, from where do you view it, and what are the environmental and physical constraints of the site? Basically take time to look at the tree or shrub and think about the form it has now and how it may grow into the space. To identify the front, determine the primary viewing area. Does one side show off the trunk flare or create a depth of field with the branch structure? If you situate the plant to greet you as you enter the house, does it feel welcoming or will a branch seem like it is poking you in the face? You can ascertain the environmental and physical constraints of the site with a quick site analysis. Consider paths and walkways, walls and fences, the sun and the direction your garden faces, and overhead trees or hardscape that affect shading. Most trees and shrubs seek the sun, so there will be a stronger pull toward the south and west.

### Pruning in the Container

Pruning a newly purchased plant in the container enables you to easily turn the plant and see all sides to determine the front, work on the plant comfortably, and cause less disturbance to the roots and root hairs when transplanting in the ground or into another container. A good initial structure is essential and can save you hundreds and even thousands of dollars in the future and lots of heartache as well. A native in a 1-gallon container may not have much more than a trunk and a stem, so obviously just let it grow a bit before pruning.

### Root Pruning

I will not cover root pruning in detail or the specifics for container plants. Often the outer roots of a plant have become root bound and dried out in a container, so before planting you will want to clip these roots until the whiter, live roots are on the tips. This pruning will encourage root growth and ramify and invigorate the plant. If the bottom part of the plant has a mound of fine, dead roots, you can cut or saw off the bottom few inches. Make clean cuts on the roots just as you would for branches above ground. This is preparation for planting, not major root pruning. Do not do major root pruning at the same time you prune the canopy. This is too stressful for the plant. When the plant is out of the container, keep the root ball covered with a moist cloth or plastic bag to reduce air contact. Root hairs die in just a few seconds!

### Pruning Nursery Stock

Pruning to restructure is part of early training. This often involves pruning to direct or encourage growth toward a particular space. In general, first remove damaged, dead, or diseased branches. Next, remove crossing, duplicating, rubbing, crowded, or competing branches. Removing the Ds and Cs is standard arboriculture practice and is particularly important in training large-stature trees. Smaller shrubs, however, may produce interesting effects if you leave a crowded or competing branch. Although you most likely will ultimately prune these branches later for a good-looking, well-structured shrub, they often make the plant take on a beautiful form with a curved or twisted trunk, a long branch reaching out of the tangle for the sun, a graceful cascade, or a rolling up and then down of a branch. Nevertheless, I always remove branches curved tightly upright against the trunk.

Plant characteristics are guided by environmental conditions and by the particular attributes of the species, which include its "essence." Sometimes I prune to reveal the essence that is already there but hidden. For instance I will remove a few suckers at the base that hide the trunk flare or prune a small,

inner branch that crosses the line of the trunk and interrupts the graceful twist of the main stems all covered with shreddy bark. Other techniques might include tying a branch up or down instead of removing it; leaving a low, long escape branch to slow vertical growth; or, rather than cutting a low branch that is too crowded at the base, I may wedge a cork in to push the branch out and give more space. Young plants are more pliable than mature plants and you can often gently guide them rather than remove a branch.

### What to Expect in Growth and How to Prune

Over-pruning a young plant will slow its growth. The more leaves you have, the more photosynthesis will occur, which results in more growth. After your initial pruning let the plant grow for a year or more, depending on the species and growth pattern. Do not continue to pick at it or prune it; leave it alone to grow and invigorate and then revisit it after there has been substantial growth.

One of the main differences between pruning trees and shrubs is the ultimate size of the plant. Small shrubs can bear the weight of multiple stems from one attachment, but for trees this is a formula for limb failure later. Initial spacing of branches and limbs along the trunk while young will save time, heartache, and cost later on.

Young trees from the nursery often have branching all the way to the ground. Identify what is called the first permanent limb. This is the limb that will be the lowest one on the trunk in the future. Even if you plan to remove lower branches as the tree gets large, leave them for now. These lower branches help increase trunk flare and girth, important for the health, balance, stability, strength and aesthetics of the tree. Over time, gradually thin out the low branches and/or shorten them as they reach the diameter of a broom handle.

### Developing the Essence of a Plant

The essence of a plant may not be immediately apparent, and this is especially true with young plants. The grace of the trunk flare, shreddy or multi-layered bark, the color of the branches, or the appearance of flowers and fruit may not develop for a number of years.

Watching a tree or shrub develop from a single stem, to multiple stems with one or more becoming the trunk, to the formation of limbs, branches and tiny twigs, all the while growing and adding each year in height, girth, taper, and layers of bark; bending into the sunlight; stretching away from competition; and displaying all of the unique quirks each native species possesses, is quite a miraculous wonder. Proper pruning of a young tree or shrub can help the plant horticulturally and aesthetically so it gets off to a good start and becomes a welcome and viable part of your garden. 