

Reprinted from Winter Issue, 2007 “Manzanita,” Journal of the East Bay Regional Parks Botanic Garden

Pruning Natives for Health & Aesthetics in Our California Gardens

JOCELYN COHEN

As an aesthetic pruner, arborist, urban forester, and landscape designer, I spend most of my waking moments looking at or thinking about trees and shrubs. When I am driving, I look at the highly irregular tree line against the horizon as well as the light through the canopy and the spaces within; at twilight the silhouette captures my eye. When I am walking, I look at form and structure, whether a plant has been pruned to show off its natural habit, styled and sheared into a hedge, or treated as topiary. In these venues I see a mixture of native and introduced species. When I am hiking, my eye captures the nuances of our California native plants as individuals, in vignette settings, and in larger tableaux. I draw from these images as I interpret a tree or shrub in my pruning practice.

The necessity to prune increases as urban areas replace wild lands and our living spaces become constricted. Larger landscapes like the big midwestern yards where I grew up call for less containment of plants. In the Bay Area, however, we are constantly challenged by conflicts between trees and views, trees shading a neighbor’s sunny yard, by the presence of power lines, the needs for screening and security, and the vulnerability of fire-prone dry or dead plants. These conditions call for pruning.

I think of the utilitarian reasons for pruning as part of the aesthetics. Aesthetic pruning combines the science and techniques of arboriculture with artistic concepts such as proportion and scale, balance, light and shadow, color, texture, leading lines, and positive and negative spaces, all of which are influenced by how the eye of the pruner makes observations in nature. This approach enhances desired characteristics of trees and shrubs, tells a story about natural forces acting on the plant, provides creative solutions to urban situations, restores form to badly pruned specimens, and promotes long-term health and vigor to plants.

A mix of ecological considerations and heartfelt emotions sometimes causes conflicts in how we approach pruning natives. Clients and colleagues exclaim that “natives are natural and wild so we shouldn’t prune them,” “natives are messy,” “natives look too informal,” and “they all have the same texture.” Or “if I prune them I might hurt them” or “natives have to look great so others will appreciate them and it’s my responsibility to accomplish that.”

Aesthetic pruning of natives draws from a number of disciplines, especially nature itself. We see variation of form in our midst—a light, airy, mature coffeeberry, treelike in the understory, dense in the open. We see the broad canopies of valley oaks spreading across an open hillside versus more upright forms in a mixed forest ravine. We see coyote brush packed together with its lower, inner branches dead from shade and competition as compared to a single plant with thick foliage near a seasonal creek. Often what we most love are older specimens such as the undulating limbs of a massive buckeye or the twisted bare mahogany branches of a manzanita.

Forms and styles seen in nature provide helpful guides to echo in pruning our garden natives. Furthermore, we can prune our plants to reflect their form in their native habitat, which is shaped by ecological and environmental conditions. I may place a kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) so it cascades over a stone or rocky bank. Rather than a thicket of ninebark (*Physocarpus capitatus*), I can

thoughtfully prune the shrub to resemble a forest of small trees, creating a sense of foreground and background with larger canes in front that vanish back into smaller ones. To accommodate a Catalina ironwood (*Lyonothamnus floribundus*) close to the eaves of a house, I situate it with a lean to the trunk. This brings out the line of the trunk and shows off the shreddy bark.

Some natives have strong structural character: trees and shrubs with an articulated branching habit or architecture that can be revealed through artful pruning. These plants become the backbone of the garden. Plants in this category include California buckeye (*Aesculus californica*), ironwood, manzanitas, toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*), oaks (*Quercus* spp.), coffeeberry (*Rhamnus californica*), dogwood (*Cornus nuttallii*), western redbud (*Cercis occidentalis*), and fremontia (*Fremontodendron* hybrids). Others that require more effort include California hazelnut (*Corylus cornuta californica*), junipers (*Juniperus* spp.), California wax myrtle (*Myrica californica*), California lilacs (*Ceanothus* spp.), currants (*Ribes* spp.), and pines (*Pinus* spp.). Every plant in a garden need not be a focal point—our eyes also need a resting place.

For instance, a coffeeberry can take on a primary position showing off its undulating branches when you prune to horizontal branches in the direction in which you want to accentuate its cascading and layering qualities. On a hillside garden where I prune, the coffeeberries weave down the path, seamlessly leading into a wilder landscape. Farther from the house I let the coffeeberries run free except for making basic structural cuts, adding a graceful line across the top and removing small branches at ground level to provide good circulation at the trunk crown. Close to the house I show off some of the elegant branching and lift the branches slightly to reveal the trunk flare near the ground.

Natives that readily sprout from the base and those with a vase-like branching pattern often make great backgrounds, provide transitions, or are used for massing. The essence of these plants derives from their blooms, fruits, fragrance, bark textures, or colors. Red twig dogwood (*Cornus sericea*) has red branches, snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*) has white berries, *Ceanothus* spp. provide blossoms, California sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*) shows twisty branches with bleached bark and pleasing leaf texture and color, California barberry (*Berberis pinnata*) features blooms and fruits, silk tassel bush (*Garrya elliptica*) has catkin tassels and attractive fruits, and western mock-orange (*Philadelphus lewisii*) furnishes fragrance and flowers.

We can view shrubs and trees in cultivated landscapes from many perspectives. As we layer on such disciplines as ecology, which cannot be ignored in discussing native plants, the practice of pruning—or not—can take on a challenging balance. When pruning trees that must support heavy weight, creating strong structure is paramount. Training to get off to a good start increases the longevity of the tree, decreases problems as the tree grows larger, and reduces future maintenance costs. Although dead, damaged, or diseased branches make excellent habitat for wildlife, removing them allows light to penetrate, retains vigor in healthy parts of the tree, and lets the eye focus on the essence of the tree. If a dead branch is old and beautiful and part of the story (i.e., the tension between life and death), you may want to keep it or break it off rather than cut it. If branches are crowded and crossed, remove those that grow inward or cross the line of the tree and retain those with an up and outward movement. Sometimes you need to remove codominant stems with narrow branch attachments and included bark that may split apart as the stems increase in girth and end weight. Pruning thick, crowded canopies allows the eye to see depth of field and light and circulates air to reduce disease and keep inside and lower branches alive. Proper pruning reduces the risk of damage

from insects and disease, whereas improper pruning increases the risks. Pruning allows us to show a plant's habit and seasonal characteristics of fruit, seed, and flower. In our mild Mediterranean climate, variable and intermittent blooms are quite common on our natives, making timing rather tricky. The most common pruning I do initially is to restore the form and habit of a plant that has been poorly pruned.

Often what we love best about our oaks, buckeyes, bays, or cypresses is the character that develops over decades or centuries. Trees and shrubs do change character over time. Some plants radically change form as they progress from youth to maturity and into senescence. Watching bark change over time is equally amazing. Thoughtful and careful pruning gives the illusion of age and size. Thinning the dense canopy of a coast live oak reveals the branch structure and accentuates the coarse to fine branching patterns that make the tree look bigger and older. Often if a tree is left unpruned, it becomes too large for its space, but we can enjoy the sense of a larger stature in tight urban space by aesthetic pruning. When we think about the essence of a tree or shrub, it may not be apparent at the moment, but we can anticipate that essence and prune so that we enjoy it sooner rather than when the tree reaches maturity. The essence in a sense drives the pruning.

Besides essence we need to know the horticultural constraints—for example, how plants respond to cuts, how wounds heal, and how the time of year factors into pruning. These considerations vary from genus to genus and between species and cultivars.

We now look at a few species with general

Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* spp.)

With manzanitas, it is the cool, deep, dark red, twisty trunk and branches I want to show off. Simplifying and articulating the structural lines visually accentuates the delicate umbels of white or pink flowers that hang like little lanterns.

To display this essence, I open the plant up by removing a few larger branches to create little windows here and there. Then I thin out some smaller branches that take the eye away from the essence. As the plant matures, nature herself shades these out. In general I retain much of the healthy inner growth to keep the plant vigorous. I clear out the dead inner twigs and shake off the dry dead leaves. I may also rub off some of the thin exfoliating layers of bark to show its smooth muscular form. One of my favorite aspects of woody plants is the unique trunk flare, so I make sure the taper is visible. Keeping the trunk crown and root pad clear of soil and weeds also prevents crown rot.

The larger the manzanita, the more sensitive it is to big cuts, which may kill an entire stem. Manzanitas do not compartmentalize well, and large cuts do not readily heal over. Branch attachments lack a distinctive collar, which may account for why I see so many flush cuts or stubs. I like to prune manzanitas in late summer when they are semidormant; I try to catch them before the tiny flower buds first form. I prune smaller manzanitas more often to keep adding interest to the form, orienting the branches to show off the winter blossoms and to keep light inside the plant.

Toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*)

The striking beauty of toyon comes with the arrival of its red berries. The canopy is more open in young and old specimens (not middle-aged ones), where spaces accentuate the bunches of fruit. During the long years between youth and maturity, we can prune to orient the branches to better display the fruit. Toyon readily sprouts from the base to rejuvenate the plant so deciding on the

number of trunks is part of long-term strategy. You may need to remove some basal sprouts. Many multitrunk specimens send out branches from one trunk that cross another trunk. Remove or shorten these branches, which interrupt the line of the tree and rub against or crowd other branches. Pruning between October and December is appropriate if fireblight is a problem; otherwise prune in late winter after the berries have lost their glow.

California lilacs (*Ceanothus* spp.)

The essence of ceanothus is their masses of blossoms with delicate fragrance. Prune after flowering in early spring, or make structural cuts in summer. New blooms form on the tips in late summer, and you do not want to remove those buds. Prune back only to the new year's growth, which likely will still have a green stem. If you prune into the old wood without interior growth, new growth on that branch will not occur.

Upright shrub and tree forms: Prune lightly as ceanothus tend to be very reactive—they will send out new branches at sharp angles in reaction to overpruning. Light thinning keeps the plant open to sun and decreases the number of shaded branches that eventually die. Remove dead leaves and branches as well, since these will also shade the live growth. Pruning major stems is best done when the plant is young, but if you restructure a mature plant, cutting one major stem a year is less stressful than making multiple large cuts at the same time. By layering the branches and leaving spaces for sunlight, you increase branches resulting in more blossoms. These spaces create depth of field to display flowers throughout the plant.

Ground cover species (*Ceanothus griseus* var. *horizontalis* 'Camel Creeper' and other prostrate kinds): Besides the blossoms, the arching habit can be accentuated. The form can be enhanced by directional pruning—cutting to a bud or branch headed in the direction you want the plant to grow. If you have a species with opposite leaves, remove the branch or bud where you cut across from the one you want to develop into a branch. Many low-growing species die out underneath the top layers of branch runners. Eventually the low-growing mat becomes taller than anticipated as more and more dead leaves and stems accumulate. I continually prune the coarse top layer of branches back to a lateral branch to keep the underlying branches alive. I retain the lush finer growth by manipulating the canopy so that the branches stretch forth. I can create a stream of blooms lacing down a wall or train them as a carpet across a bare bank.

In summary, the trees and shrubs you prune have particular qualities influenced by the ecology, cultural conditions, and urban constraints in your garden. How you observe these features varies as much as the plants themselves. I have heard many people claim they learn to see plants better by drawing them. I learn by looking and pruning, waiting, observing the growth and reaction over time, and watching the influences of nature in my outdoor adventures. Part of the joy of growing and caring for natives is observing the diversity of form in their native habitats and bringing this beauty into everyday settings. By combining sound horticultural knowledge and technique with aesthetics and keen observation, we can enhance the majesty that our trees and shrubs naturally possess.