The Aesthetic Pruning Approach

Key Concepts

Pruning with Design Intent

All pruning affects the look and design of a garden. Making intentional design choices when pruning individual plants allows the pruner to impact a garden in positive ways that enhance its overall theme and enrich harmony and interest within the garden.

Have a Plan

Before starting to prune, have a plan for the tree and the garden as a whole. Work in stages to accomplish the goal. Respect plants and make their health the top priority. It can be helpful to create a multi-year plan to accomplish pruning goals. Removal of large branches and trunks is often best accomplished gradually over time. The larger the cut the more important the seasonal timing of the cut to give the plant the best opportunity to callus over pruning wounds and to respond with growth that is not reactive but is in step with the growth cycle.
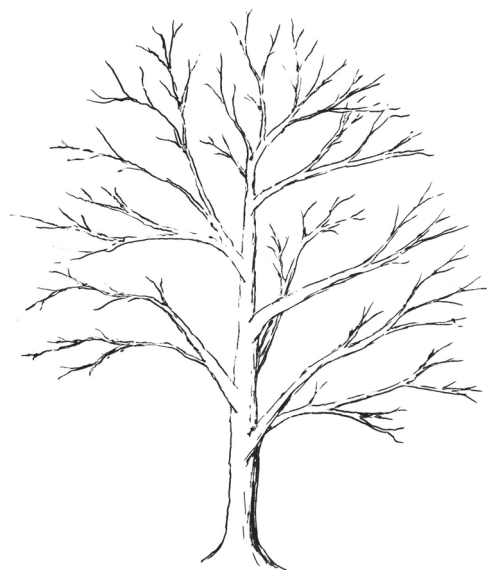
Find the Good

Focus on what is best about a plant and accentuate it. Identifying the essence of the tree is a good starting point. What is it about this particular species that is enjoyable, striking or beautiful? It could be its structure, shape, color, foliage, flowers, fruit, bark or any quality that distinguishes it. As well as the general species qualities, find the good within a particular specimen. It could be the trunk line, a particular branch or branches, the way it relates to another feature in the garden like a stone or water feature or any number and combination of features. The goal is not to remove the bad, but to emphasize and enhance the good.

Coarse to Fine

Describes the growth pattern of a woody plant in terms of taper. Trees and shrubs tend to be widest at the base of the trunk and gradually diminish in girth higher up the trunk. The same is true of branches. The thick branches are lower on the trunk while higher up the branches become thinner. Branches also taper from thickest at their place of attachment to thinnest at the branch tips. As pruners, the goal is to preserve or restore the coarse to fine expression of plants so that they appear resolved and natural. The same is true of our bodies. Imagine if our arms were as thick as legs and our legs as thin as arms - we would be out of balance.

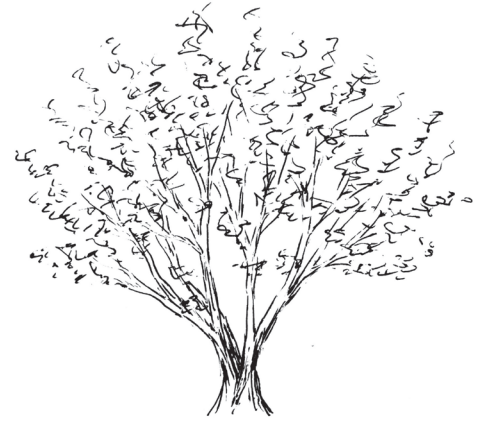**coarse → medium coarse → medium → medium fine → fine**

Transitions also play a major role in the coarse to fine philosophy. Plant parts transition from coarse to fine in a gradual procession. So a pruning cut resulting in a coarse branch transitioning to a fine branch will stand out as unnatural and appear forced. The goal of the pruner is to have an invisible hand. It should not be immediately apparent where cuts were made on a pruned specimen and following the rule of 1/3 in transitions insures this (Gilman, 2012, p.83).

Up and Out

Illustrates the concept that, in most cases, trunks and branches grow from their attachment to their tips in a direction that is generally upwards and away from the center of the tree. Thus major trunks or branches that cross the center – for instance from the back to the front or from the right half to the left half of the tree – are potentially problematic as they disturb the natural flow of a tree's structure and take the eye in unwanted directions.

Tell a Story

Each garden tells a story and each feature within a garden has a voice that contributes to the message imparted by the garden. What is meant by telling a story is fairly straightforward and usually relates to the environment the garden is portraying, which provides an explanation for the overall appearance and the appearance of each feature within the garden. If the story involves a mountaintop scene, one would expect hard weathered stone and gnarled trees that have overcome harsh conditions. In a lake or stream scene, one would expect smooth stones and lush vegetation. Find what gives the garden unity and harmony and honor it.

Aesthetic Pruning Terms

Pruning with Design Intent
Having the garden's design in mind while pruning.

Basic Art Principles
Unity, balance, emphasis, contrast, proportion, scale, visual mass, space, negative space, depth, texture, light, line, movement, transition, coarse to fine, shading, perspective, framing, repetition

Essence of a Tree
Identify the "It Factor." What elements or aspects make the tree unique and of interest? All aspects of the tree must be in balance, helping to define and elevate the essence of the tree. Look for it in the following areas:
• Lasting features: trunk attributes, exposed root collar, location of branches, limbs and twigs
• Temporary features: flowers, fruit, foliage, exfoliating bark, foliar color, scent and light
• Relative strength or grace
• Motion and movement
• Lines: leading, guiding, framing
• Definition: an area, a space, a view, the entire garden
• Light: shadows and silhouettes
• Sound: leaves that catch the wind with a particular sound

Focal Point Pruning
In addition to pruning to bring out the essence of a tree, focal point pruning shows an individual specimen at its best through a high level of detail and expression. Focal point pruning includes:
• Tree should draw and hold the eye.
• Structure, coarse to fine, proportion and transition; flow and movement from the roots to the trunk through to the branch tips
• Ramification (see illustration below)
• Use of negative space
• Hide and conceal pruning cuts.
• Attention to detail; every inch of the tree is considered.
• Every aspect of the tree is in balance: essence vs. other aspects, primary vs. secondary, bold vs. subtle, wood vs. leaves, permanent vs. temporary, current look vs. future look, individual plant vs. entire garden.
• Prune for the primary viewpoint(s) and view time(s).

Ramification

Winter Silhouette

The winter silhouette is enhanced by a proper background. In areas with mild winters, the winter silhouette can help to bring a sense of seasonality.

• Essence of the tree is clearly defined.
• Emphasis is on structural aspects such as: proportion, flow, transitions, movement and ramification.
• Visible root crown and roots
• Hide and conceal pruning cuts.
• Can incorporate the art of decay and deterioration in older material.

Garden Context

Garden context refers to those elements or features which surround or influence the garden environment. It is the big picture in which the garden resides. Influencing elements may include adjacent natural areas, structures and hardscape features. Think of "garden context" as an all-encompassing aesthetic term.

• The essence, style, intent and mood of the garden – Japanese, native, formal, informal, etc.
• The role of the tree in the garden; the surroundings and the tree's relationship to them
• Establishing garden unity, harmony and interest through pruning and placement

Vignette
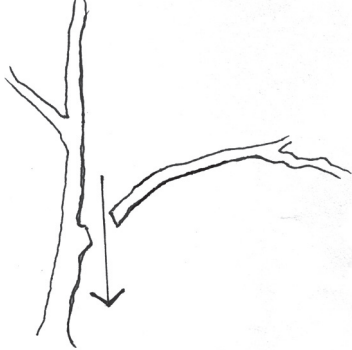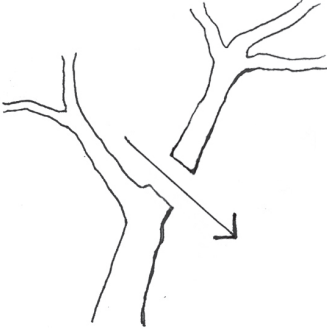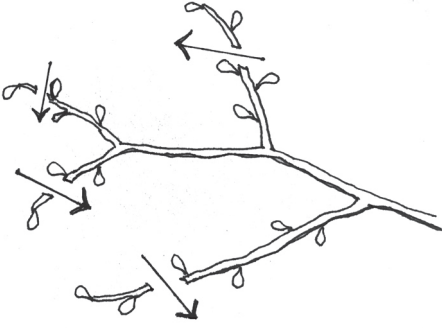
An intimate scene in a garden

Grove

A planted group of three or more trees pruned collectively

The three cuts most commonly used for Aesthetic Pruning

REMOVAL	REDUCTION	TIPPING
Removal of a branch or shoot at the point of origin	Removal of a leader by cutting to a side branch, establishing new apical dominance (a new leader)	Cutting to a node, bud or leaf, also known as heading back or heading

REMOVAL

Removal of a branch or shoot at the point of origin

- Used most often to reduce density, crowding or to remove dead wood

- Reveals structure, direction, character and allows air and light to filter through the tree

- Common on the sun side or thickest area of the plant

- Appropriate for removal of coarse branches

- Important for long term size control and character development

REDUCTION

Removal of a leader by cutting to a side branch, establishing new apical dominance (a new leader)

- Used most often to reduce height or length while allowing for a more predictable outcome of future growth

- Reduces height and bulk

- Important for long term size control and maintaining proportions

- A quality cut over quantity of cuts; accomplish more with fewer cuts.

TIPPING

Cutting to a node, bud or leaf, also known as heading back or heading

- Used most often to maintain the outer contour shape of a plant

- Stimulates release of the branch's inner buds

- Reserve tipping cuts for the end of the pruning session to remove small diameter tips. Solve the larger problems first with removal cuts and reduction cuts.

- Note: Tipping cuts will stimulate interior growth. If your goal is to thin a tree or shrub, keep your tipping cuts to a minimum.

Creating Branch Definition

Clear Junctions

Creating space around branch intersections reveals the pattern of a tree's structure and as a result the tree 'reads' more clearly. Clearing sprouts and unwanted branchlets 6"–8" from around intersections is enough to provide visual clarity and makes the tree less confused and busy looking. (See illustrations below.)

Clear Bottom Line

Cleaning growth that originates on the underside of a branch provides a smooth bottom line that highlights the branch shape. Trees with pads of foliage like pines, other conifers and Japanese maples greatly benefit from a clean bottom line, as do plants with layers of foliage.

Branch before pruning

Branch after clearing junctions and bottom line

Defining Branch Lead

Every branch has an apex, or lead, just as the tree itself does. Pruning so that the branch lead is apparent adds clarity to the shape of the tree, as does shaping branch foliage contours to reflect the overall habit of the tree. That is, trees with rounded tops also have rounded branches and trees with angular tops have angularly shaped branches.

Outside of Trunk Curve

Branches that originate on the outside of a curve of the parent trunk or branch emphasize the curve. Branches that originate on the inside of a curve diminish the effect of the curve. Branches that originate on the inside of curves are usually shaded by the foliage above and on older trees often die out. So eliminating branches on the inside of curves can lend a natural look to the tree.

Plant Roles

Background

Background plants provide context for the garden. They are most often placed on the edges but may be interspersed throughout the garden. There is very little, if any, woody structure visible, so their appearance is of solid foliage – a wall of green.

Transitional

Transitional plants provide some interest for the viewer without calling too much attention to themselves. They serve to keep the viewer engaged with the garden and to provide contrast and/or deepen the interest of focal points. They often show some structure and wood, but not too much. A peek-a-boo effect between foliage and structure is often employed.

Focal Point

Focal point plants catch hold of and sustain a viewer's attention. They are placed in areas with prominent sight lines and viewing positions. They are the stars of the garden or, at least, their corner of the garden. They are special because of shape and form or for some seasonal interest such as flowers, fruit or fall color. Much of the structure is often visible and the foliage is groomed to a high degree, although the tree itself may have a natural appearance.

Actors in a Play

It is helpful to think of the various plants in the garden as actors in a play or film in which there are few leading roles or stars whose personalities and lives we know much about. There are several supporting roles; we have a good sense of their personalities but their stories are less developed. They interact with the leads and play off of them. Through them we learn more about the leads and they provide depth to the story. Then there are the extras in the background that establish the setting. We know little of their personality or stories, but they give context and believability to the story.

Balancing Act

Plant health	Progress on completing plan
Plant's needs	Our needs
Our vision	Client's vision
Aesthetics	Function
How tree looks today	How tree will look in future
Look of individual plant	Look of the garden
Close view	Distant view
Structure	External shape and texture
How plant looks in current season	How plant will look in coming seasons
Positive space	Negative space
Individual interest	Unity
Left brain	Right brain
Craft	Art
Natural habit	Garden form

Reading a Garden

Reading A Garden

Every garden tells a story. Although not immediately evident, the story exists and is important to the work we do as pruners since our goal is to enhance and strengthen what the garden has to communicate. The story may be obvious or subtle, somewhat superficial or deep and meaningful.

Each garden has something to say about why it exists and what it has to offer its visitors. The following questions will aid in uncovering the aspects of the garden which make up its story. Step back, see a bigger picture. Incorporate. Repeat.

Step Back – See a Bigger Picture

What is the overall mood or feeling of the garden? How do you feel at various places within it?
What gives it interest? What is its essence? Is there an identifiable style?
What is its purpose/function?
What is its age?
What is the architectural style of the house and hardscape?
How formal or informal is the garden?
What is the impact of local topography and surrounding large trees?
Is the garden compatible with its surroundings?
Where is the flow of the garden physically and visually?
Where are the primary view angles?
What unifies the garden and gives it harmony?
What makes the garden special?
Seasonal interest? How does it change over the year?
Other senses: sound, touch, smell, taste – how are they expressed?
What are the focal points? What do they say about the garden? Are they presented well?

Incorporate

What are the garden's best features? How can they be emphasized and improved?
Are there objects that take away from the story or are out of sync with the garden?
Would the garden look better with more plants or fewer plants?
Are the scale and proportion of the plant material consistent with and appropriate to the house and hardscape?
Are the lines expressed compatible or are there lines that conflict with the overall flow?
Is the palette of textures and colors appropriate?
Is there a way to incorporate outside views or features into the garden experience?

Step back, see a bigger picture. Incorporate. Repeat.