

Pruning Forsythia

Marie Hildebrandt

Erie County Master Gardener



After a long, dreary winter there is nothing quite like forsythia in full bloom. Blooming forsythia signals the start of the growing season, a time of resurgence in the garden and new beginnings for all other flowering shrubs and plants.

To preserve the integrity of the shrub and to guarantee it will continue its spectacular display for years to come, pruning is essential.

The golden bell-shaped four-petal flowers are easily recognizable and last for two to three weeks. They are 1 ¼ to 1 ½ inches long and grow in clusters. Left unattended the shrub can grow eight to 10 feet tall and 10 to 12 feet wide or more. The size and shape vary depending on the variety.

Native to China, Korea and Europe, forsythias are best grown in full sun (up to six hours a day), but can tolerate partial shade. Easy to grow, forsythias can be planted in a wide range of soils, but do not perform well in poorly drained, wet soils. Deer resistant, there are no serious pests or diseases to contend with.

The spring show the forsythias provide is short-lived. For the rest of the summer, some refer to the shrubs as the “plain Janes” of the landscape. But to ensure that the show becomes a prominent part of the landscape each year, it is imperative to prune the shrubs after the spring bloom. If not, a shrub will become an overgrown mess!

The timing for pruning is of utmost importance. Forsythias should be pruned shortly after they finish flowering and the task should be finished no later than mid-July. The shrubs start developing new

buds in early to mid-summer on one-year-old wood. As the branches of the shrubs age, their flowering potential is reduced. Pruning branches where buds formed, severely reduces the follow year's display.

Experts recommend using pruning shears (hand pruners) for branches up to half an inch in diameter; loppers to cut branches up to an inch in diameter, and a small pruning saw for larger branches.

Remove any dead, damaged or diseased branches; those that are growing inward toward the center of the shrub; those that cross each other or rub against other branches; and some of the tallest vigorously upright shoots. Cut back the oldest, thickest branches about one foot above the ground. Some can be pruned back a lesser amount allowing new shoots to emerge from these shortened stems. (These shoots will produce flowers in their second and third years of growth.) Thin out the congested branches in the canopy of the shrub by cutting branches at their points of origin on the main stem.

Pruning gives definition to the shrub. Air flow through the branches of the shrubs provides for healthier growth and a far better display of golden flowers the following spring.

If the shrub is overgrown and unruly, it is possible to rejuvenate it by removing one-fourth to one-third of the oldest (largest) stems. It is not inconceivable to cut some back to ground level every other year. New stems will replace them and bloom once they begin to mature. Older, neglected forsythia shrubs can be cut back to within three to four inches of the ground late in the winter or early spring. They will rejuvenate, grow back quickly and should begin flowering again in about two years.