

Hedge Clippers Can Create Fire Hazards

Have you ever looked inside a bush that has been regularly shaped with a hedge trimmer? It may look green and beautifully manicured on the outside, but pull back the branches and you will probably find a nest of dead twigs and dried out leaves. This dead, twiggy interior of the plant creates a nest where embers can land and [ignite during a wildfire](#). Once a bush is burning, the fire can spread to other plants, fences, and your home.

Juniper and cypress are the most dangerous examples of this kind of bush because their tight structures, woody interiors, and oily needles make them primed to burn. **We recommend that you remove all juniper and cypress from your yard.** For other kinds of bushes and shrubs, hand pruning can shape a plant to be more resilient to wildfire.

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Why you should avoid hedge trimmers

Hedge trimmers compromise the structural integrity of a shrub by splitting the branches, cutting leaves in half, and creating jagged edges. This not only detracts from the visual appeal of the plant, but also poses a threat to its overall health. This unnatural type of pruning leads to something called "[the hydra effect](#)." When hedge trimmers indiscriminately sever buds at the ends of branches, it triggers a rapid burst of growth, resulting in the proliferation of new branches. This new growth is exclusively on the outer perimeter of the plant and can shade out the interior of the plant, leading it to become woody. This thick, woody interior is what increases the risk of ignition from embers.

Open structure vs closed structure

The hydra effect creates a plant with a closed structure. This means there is a dense inner structure of the plant, often made up of dead or dying material. When you remove this inner material you create an open structure plant. During a wildfire if there are embers falling, in an open structure plant the embers will fall through the plant and land on the ground. If you have proper ground covering such as gravel, then these embers do not become a threat to your home. Choose plants with an open structure that are drought resistant and hold water in their leaves. Generally, these kinds of plants can be maintained as part of a fire smart landscape.

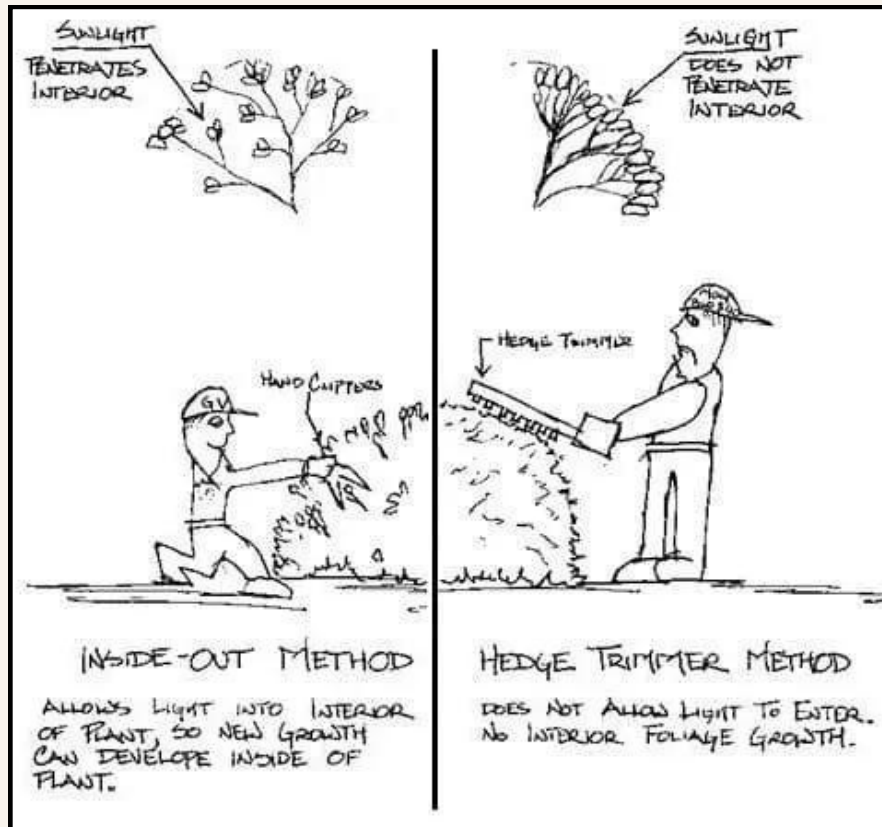
Why you should hand prune

Hand pruning offers a more precise and controlled approach to shrub maintenance. While it may require a bit more time and effort initially, the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks. Hand-pruned shrubs require maintenance only once every year or two, compared to five to six times if using hedge trimmers. This not only saves you time and money but also promotes healthier, more resilient plants.

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Case by case

Remember that for fire hazardous plants such as juniper or Italian cypress should be removed not pruned! While hedge trimmers may offer a quick fix for unruly shrubs, their use often comes at a cost to plant health and vitality. By embracing the art of hand pruning, gardeners can cultivate healthier, more fire resilient landscapes.



Get started

Inspect the plant's interior and exterior. Look for diseased limbs, discolored leaves, and dried, dead twigs. Remove all debris and cut any diseased limbs away from the base of the plant. Try to keep the natural form of the plant.

For more tips on how to hand prune, check out the library of resources from the [UC Marin Master Gardeners](#).