Most gardening requires patience. We plant seeds and wait for them to sprout. We put in small potted plants and wait for them to grow. Pruning, however, gives instant gratification, producing a satisfying pile of debris and a lightened and refreshed look for plants.

Pruning is to large extent an art, but with knowledge of your shrub’s needs, we all can unleash our inner artist. First of all, forget Edward Scissorhands! He was using shears – not the preferred tool for most pruning. Bypass hand pruners and loppers for larger stems give best results. Shears are used on hedges such as boxwood, and even these may best be done with bypass hand pruners.

A simple rule applies for most flowering shrubs. Prune soon after blooming has finished! Here are some guidelines to get you started on this most enjoyable spring chore:

**Camellias** like an open center, and limbs removed within eighteen inches of the ground. Make cuts on an angle, and just above another branch or an outward facing bud. Remove sucker growth, sprouts that grow straight up. Start in the middle of the plant and work out, to open for good air movement, then work from the outside in to reduce size and create a pleasing shape. Step back often to see the overall effect and enjoy the results of
your artistry! Camellias have two growth periods in spring. If clear sap is seen bleeding from cuts, stop pruning and wait a couple of weeks.

**Azaleas** must be pruned before the Fourth of July, when next year’s flowers begin forming. They’re not particular about where cuts are made, because leaf buds occur all along the stems. Leave a tuft of foliage to hide cut stems, and make every fourth or fifth cut deep into the bush, to continually rejuvenate the plant’s growth. Never shear azaleas! Shape plants lower at the outer edges of beds and gradually rise to taller height in the middle, giving a pillow effect.

**Gardenias** are pruned much like azaleas, shaping plants to suit available space. Spray with insecticidal soap after pruning, to control whitefly and sooty mold.

**Hydrangeas** can be selectively pruned to remove spent blooms, or they can be left alone for now and pruned in late winter or early spring, cutting to a newly emerging leaf bud. Overall pruning may remove all flowers, as most bloom on two-year-old wood.

**Spirea and Abelia** are best maintained in a naturally spreading habit, not turned into green meatballs! Leave them alone as long as they’re not completely out of bounds, and then they can be cut to the ground in late winter.

To see examples of artfully pruned shrubs, join us for the annual Tour of Gardens, sponsored by the Friends of Maclay Gardens, on May 19th. The day starts with a breakfast at Maclay Gardens, and a self-directed tour of 8 fine gardens around town throughout the day. Call 487-4556 for more information or tickets.