

## Q&A With Amanda Martin

This document contains Amanda's responses to questions generated during her webinar, **Prune Your Native Plants: How, Why and When it Matters the Most**, which occurred live on November 15, 2023. A recording of the webinar can be found here: [www.flawildflowers.org/231115-webinar-prune-your-native-plants/](http://www.flawildflowers.org/231115-webinar-prune-your-native-plants/). If you have additional questions or would like to inquire about Amanda's services, you can contact Amanda at [amanda@groundedsol.com](mailto:amanda@groundedsol.com) or (352) 219-538 or visit her website: [groundedsol.com/](http://groundedsol.com/).

### GENERAL PRUNING TIPS

**What are your thoughts on the general idea that "native plants need less maintenance than non-natives"?** My reaction has changed a lot over time. It seems people like the idea that natives require less maintenance because it equates to not having to track another activity of life. I find that the maintenance practices of sod and non-natives follow a more prescriptive route, rather than letting the plant perform to its natural aesthetics. Native plant enthusiasts tend to enjoy watching plants perform to their natural aesthetics. This simple preference change can reduce the automatic maintenance habits in the average landscape. This is the metric that reveals the "lower" maintenance requirements of native plants vs non-native.

**Do you prune differently when you want to attract a lot of pollinators?** Yes, I try to prune during the vegetative seasons of each plant to help maximize bloom set and seed production.

**What does the reference point of pruning "to the ground" mean?** "To the ground" is a natural point where the softer foliage or stems will bend or break off should you "step on it." If the plant is flexible but slightly woody, like a Wild coffee, "to the ground" may look like 6-8 inches. If the plant is emerging from stolons, like Fakahatcheegrass or Frogfruit, "to the ground" might look like 2-4 inches. If the plant is emerging from rhizomes or a deep-rooted culm or tuber, like Twinflower or Coontie, "to the ground" may be literally to the ground.

**The pruning timelines in this webinar generally apply to Central Florida. How would this be shifted as you move south?** I would move the entire cycle up 2-4 weeks. South Florida will achieve warmer temperatures earlier in the calendar year, causing growth to accelerate earlier in the year. Since you rarely get natural freezes in the South, and freezing becomes more unlikely, you can prune in December/January rather than January/February. The idea I'm promoting is that when pruning annuals, you'll want to make adjustments based on solstice/equinox cycles rather than strictly temperature cycles. For perennials or evergreen shrubs, we tend to see growth/dormancy cycles based on temperature and rainfall shifts across the four seasons.

**How long does a plant need to establish before pruning?** Let the plant establish for 2-3 years before practicing hard pruning to the ground. Without a robust root system to regenerate a new top, the plant will not be able to survive losing its leaves. A hard prune is typically reserved for a time where you need to regenerate the top of the plant and have it come back 'like new.'

**Can you provide some advice for planting in shady landscapes?** Plants that grow in shaded areas have seasons of rapid growth and expansion as well as seasons of dieback and retraction. Check out the Florida Wildflower Foundation's [guide for wildflowers to grow in the shade](#).

## PLANT INTERACTIONS IN THE LANDSCAPE

**How do you control the St Augustine-type grasses? Within two months in summer, while I'm away, they grow into the garden and I come back to huge mats of grass. I don't want to mulch too thickly as I am looking for reseeding from my wildflowers for the coming fall/winter.** I would recommend creating a larger border to give the grass room to grow while you are gone so it doesn't invade your wildflower area. St Augustine will always spread aboveground via stolons. A physical barrier can slow new growth if it is tall enough, but it won't stop it. A chemical barrier like herbicide can slow the active growth. By trying to keep a lush, trimmed edge on your St Augustine, you will continually run into this issue.

**I mistakenly planted Oblong twinflower in a bed. It has taken over, crowding out *Conradina*, *Stokesia*, *Baptisia* and others, so mowing isn't practical. I wish I had not planted it there. Any suggestions for getting rid of it?** *Dychoriste oblongifolia* spreads by underground rhizomes. The best way to remove them is to dig up the existing root system or apply herbicide selectively to the foliage. Unfortunately, you have already realized that intermixing them with other desirable plants makes it difficult to keep manicured. My recommendation would be to transplant your desirable plants into pots or another flower bed in the yard, and then work to remove the twinflower root systems.

## SPECIES SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

### Shrubs/Small Trees

**Firebush (*Hamelia patens*):** Prune in spring between February and March after the last threat of freeze has passed. I don't recommend covering your Firebush if it freezes. Let it go through the freeze and cut away dead wood in the spring when new growth begins to emerge. In South Florida, you may be able to prune as early as

January if it is warm and you have fresh buds breaking. You are pruning to refresh the canopy and manage the size for the year.

**Beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*):** Prune in January/February. Beautyberry can develop buds fast in the spring, so keep watch so you don't prune too late. It wasn't until I was tracking these growth habits that I realized those spring buds quickly set green berries that go seemingly unnoticed for most of the year. I started to understand that if you cut Beautyberry late in the season, you cut off the unripe berries. Now, when I miss that spring window, I have to wait a year to prune. I recommend cutting them low, around 4-6 inches off the ground. This will spur new growth lower on the plant and likely create a more orderly bush canopy for the rest of the year. If legginess is still a problem, I will do the hard prune in early February and then go out every 3-7 days and nip the tips of the new buds to create branching lower in the plant prior to bloom set. It takes more vigilance but creates a more compact growth habit without sacrificing fall berries.

**Necklacepod (*Sophora tomentosa*):** Necklacepod grows in coastal areas and cannot withstand freezing temperatures. I would recommend a hard prune in February after the threat of freezes. A hard prune would be in the range of 50% to 75% of the canopy. You can do a shaping cut further into the spring, around May/June, at around 10% to 15% of the canopy. (Shaping cuts do not remove all of the new growth from the hard prune. The term is used to define the "ball" or "square" shape many landscapers use.) The summertime will yield a lot of growth with the heat and rains of Florida, so any practice cuts will grow out and you can keep learning how your Necklacepod grows best.

**Buttonsage (*Lantana involucrata*):** Buttonsage is a gorgeous shrub that is generally self-maintaining, meaning it tends to keep a balanced canopy. I typically trim to a desired shape, be it circular or square, in the spring between February and May. I tend to let the plant grow the rest of the year and enjoy the winter blooms. If you prefer the plant to be tall and wide, prune every 2-3 years to shape. If you want to replenish the canopy because it has thinned or an old branch has broken and left a canopy gap, prune hard in the spring and re-groom the shape you like over the summertime growth.

***Prunus* spp.:** *Prunus* species are best pruned during their first leaf flush after bloom. It is not advisable to prune late in the year because you will be removing budwood.

**Simpson's stopper (*Myrcianthes fragrans*):** Simpson's stopper can be pruned any time of the year, especially if you are trying to keep a boxed hedge, which requires monthly/bi-monthly shearing. I feel it is best pruned during the spring flush for the strongest canopy shaping and then leave it alone for the rest of the year. I tend not to prune it to the ground unless I need to rehabilitate the entire canopy.

**Wild coffee (*Psychotria nervosa*):** I have had a few different experiences with Wild coffee. The dwarf form is intended to be a 'self-maintaining size,' meaning you can trim the odd branch but you shouldn't need to groom the entire canopy. That being said, the regular coffee can become 6-8 feet tall. I find a hard prune in February/March will tighten up the canopy by encouraging a new flush of growth. I tend to trim hard when I want the plant to grow denser throughout the year. Then, in May/June, I'll do a lighter trimming to shape the canopy to my aesthetics. Smaller pruning can be a few inches off each branch or just trimming long branches back to the main stem. Once the canopy produces flowers, I don't prune until after the berries have naturally fallen off the plant.

**Saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*):** Saw palmetto is a great shrub and it can get quite large. Pruning it can be tough work and you will want to wear thick jeans, long sleeves, gloves and eye protection, but a small chainsaw can cut through the main stalks to reduce the size of any plant. Saw palmettos burn hot in wildfires so don't worry about doing damage as you go at it. It will sprout new stalks and regrow as thick as ever.

**Coontie (*Zamia integrifolia*):** Between February and May is a good window to prune Coontie. When pruned in May, June rains will bring a fast flush of new fronds.

### **Wildflowers**

**False rosemary (*Conradina* spp.):** Because it is a short-lived perennial, I find this plant dies off after a few years and doesn't require much pruning. A spring trim can help in an active growing year to add some shape to the small canopy.

***Salvia* spp.:** Prune your *Salvias* all the way to the ground, two or three times a year. January/February is a good time to prune for spring performance. June is another good time to trim back as the rains come and spur summertime growth. November/December after blooming and seed-setting is a third time to prune to the ground. Should you want to wait, you can prune in January/February depending on the performance of your *Salvia*. I have noticed white and pink *Salvias* tend to be larger plants than the red *Salvia*. And all types of *Salvia* grow more aggressively with supplemental water or wet soil conditions.

**Ironweed (*Vernonia* spp.):** Ironweed grows really tall, around 6-8 feet, and may rely on wind for seed dispersal. If that is the case, the height is an asset to the plant. Dwarf ironweed grows about half the size of Giant ironweed and comes in around 4 feet. If you are interested in a smaller plant, a different species may be a better choice. That said, if Ironweed is what you really want, I would recommend pruning it lightly and repeatedly through its vegetative growth cycle. You may also want to keep the ground a little dryer than wet. Ironweed naturally grows in wetter

environments, so by creating an adverse soil condition, it may cause the plant to become stunted and thus shorter. Reduce its access to water but do not shut it off completely.

**Spiderwort (*Tradescantia ohiensis*):** Spiderwort is a great seasonal shifter, meaning it is looking good when the majority of plants are shifting seasons. They look good in November, December and January and can be cut back hard in May/June.

**Skyblue clustervine (*Jacquemontia pentanthos*):** Skyblue clustervine is very attractive and I'm seeing it used more and more. It has a late summer/fall blooming season, so I'd do all my pruning well before then. There is a natural low-growth cycle as we emerge from winter into spring, and I have noted that is a good time to prune Skyblue clustervine. Heavy pruning can occur in the spring if it's growing too high in the canopy or if you want to invigorate fresh vines from the base of the plant. Shaping and grooming can occur through spring/summer if you want to tighten up the vine growth against a trellis.

### **Grasses**

Using natural wildfire patterns as a guide, grasses can be pruned annually, every other year, or every three years to replenish foliage for larval activity and invigorate blooms. I typically cut flexible blades to the ground or back to where they become inflexible, so depending on the species, the height may be variable.

**Gamagrass/Fakahatcheegrass (*Tripsacum spp.*):** Fakahatcheegrass will brown out naturally and can be cut to the ground anytime the foliage is unsightly. When pruned in January/February, I have observed it flushing back out quickly and can enjoy full spring growth.

**Muhlygrass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*):** I have seen Muhlygrass pruned very early in the spring, like January/February, but I have had great results pruning to the ground as late as May.

**Lovegrass (*Eragrostis spp.*):** Lovegrass gets a pruning in my yard every year. I tend to prune them back in the spring along with Muhlygrass and Fakahatcheegrass. Several clients have voiced complaints when the bloom stalks with seeds detach and blow around the yard like tumbleweeds. If this is an issue in your landscape, I would encourage raking or light pruning to remove the seed heads. Lovegrass has a tendency to turn dry and brown in the winter months. Once the plant begins to regrow its blue/green blades from the center of the plant, hand jostling the brown thatch will easily remove the unsightly thatch and give some space and air for the new blades to fill out quickly when spring gets here. I have noticed when Lovegrass is planted in shade, there is a more dramatic transition between the seasons. When it is planted in sun, there is more consistent foliage year-round.

**Bluestem (*Andropogon* spp.):** Prune similar to other grasses. Any prairie, sandhill or flatwoods grasses have a natural wildfire interval that helps rejuvenate the ecosystem.

### **NOTES ABOUT BURNING**

Amanda recommends pruning like fire, meaning to utilize pruning seasonal in ways that would mimic Florida's natural fire seasons. In this webinar, there is discussion about experimenting by actually conducting microburns in a home landscape, especially in reference to maintaining grasses. However, Amanda does not recommend that homeowners attempt this strategy and notes that there may be local regulations prohibiting such activities.