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NEWS RELEASE

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Pruning Needle Evergreens

Needle evergreens, such as pines and junipers, are frequently planted in the southern San Joaquin Valley and in surrounding mountain communities. These plants may grow for years with little attention, but, if pruned, are often pruned incorrectly. If pruning is desired, the first question to ask is *Why?* The principal reasons for pruning ornamental plants fall within the categories of structure, health, safety, and appearance. Structure and health are not usually factors in pruning decisions regarding needle evergreens. Safety may be a consideration, prompting thinning to reduce leaf surface area to prevent blow-down, although it is uncommon to see needle evergreens uprooted in storms. The appearance of these plants is often not enhanced unless pruning is done correctly.

Needle evergreens may be categorized based on the number of lateral buds. If a plant has many lateral buds, it usually can be cut back (headed) and these buds will break. If no lateral buds are present, heading may remove the only growing point, leaving a stub without new shoots.

Junipers, cypress, and arborvitae have many lateral buds. They are tolerant of pruning and can be sheared, but because these plants can be sheared does not imply they always should be. Junipers, in particular, have an informal growth habit which is best preserved by a more natural style of pruning accomplished by a combination of heading and thinning cuts. Like most needle evergreens, junipers are not shade tolerant, and the underside of plants will become brown and open if enough light doesn't reach branches. To prune spreading junipers for long-term fullness, remove more top growth than bottom, allowing light to penetrate and keeping the bottom branches alive. To keep the informal look, shorten a long

branch and then cut back side branches proportionally. Often a branch may be pruned back to a smaller shoot which is growing parallel over the top of the main branch. The pruning cut beneath will be hidden, and the small shoot will become dominant.

The interiors of cypress and arborvitae plants are usually devoid of foliage, and too much removal of outer foliage exposes the not-so-attractive center. Buds and new growth may not develop on older wood which no longer has green shoots; therefore, it is best to confine pruning to the green portion of the plant. Spring is the best time for pruning as new growth begins. Junipers, cypress, and arborvitae can be pruned at other times of the year, but won't regenerate as quickly.

Pines have a strong growing point at the end of a branch, with few or no lateral buds along the branch. A pine pruned as a mulberry will not respond as a mulberry! Pines can be left unpruned; however, to make a pine more dense, one-third to two-thirds of the new shoots may be removed. Mugho pines, a shrub form, especially benefit from proper pruning to increase density. This should be done only when the shoot is elongating, which is mid-spring. The new shoot, called a candle, is very soft and can be pinched off with thumb and forefinger. If a branch is cut behind this growing point it ceases to grow.

Many other needle evergreens found in the cold climates, such as yew, hemlock, spruce and fir, do not grow well on the Valley floor. Fir and spruce species can be found at higher elevations and are usually left unpruned.

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