

Balls and Squares

Those of us who try to give correct information to the public about proper horticultural maintenance have a particular aversion to hacking defenseless shrubs into balls and squares. I remember looking at privet hedges lining many city blocks when I was young. They seemed odd – flat on top, sparse leaves – and the feeling plants shouldn't look that way has always stuck with me.

Here in the Southwest, we rely less on privet but we do similar things with others – generally Texas Ranger (*Leucophyllum*) and cassia. No doubt you have seen them with shaved tops, looking like a Marine Corps barber pruned them, or they may as spherical as a beach ball.

Some people must find this attractive, giving a landscape a formal appearance. That is their privilege. My job is to point out that this is not in the best interest of the plant.

Why prune severely? If the plant has outgrown its space, cutting brings it down to manageable size. This works, but it makes more sense to install something that would stay smaller in the first place. This is not always possible, for instance when the builder's landscaper installed whatever was handy. Then again, some shrubs are just so pretty, and survive so well here in the Mojave, it seems worth doing the work to keep them small.

“Balls and squares” pruning produces a thin flimsy covering of leaves and flowers on the outermost parts. The airy shell appearing on the very rim of the twiggy sphere may be attractive.

Within the bush itself, the plant is suffering. When you chop off the ends of the plant to form a rigid shape, it produces a flush of new growth – many small twigs at the tips, and only there. The plant's resources are directed to that area.

Look inside the leafy shell of one of these butchered plants, and you will see dry wood with few, if any, leaves. Remember, leaves are food factories. Even if a shrub has a robust root system, that kind of pruning puts it under unhealthy stress. If the plant **lacks** a sturdy root system, its life might be shortened.

What to do? To rejuvenate a tortured leucophyllum or cassia can be daunting. I once received an email ago from someone whose six foot tall Texas Ranger had about three inches worth of foliage all located at the tips of the twigs. Was there any way to get it into some kind of natural shape –with lots of leaves and flowers? Or was it a lost cause? I called on a local woody plant expert, who assured me that these desert plants can be cut down to a few inches and will come



Texas Ranger

back in a few months with leaves and blossoms. As they come back, they'll take on a more natural shape, which tends to be fairly round.

This should be done at the right time, not in midsummer a brutal time for plants. To refurbish a Texas Ranger, wait until the end of January, when it loses some of its leaves. For cassia, wait until it has finished blooming in April or May to prune.

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