Beyond Hedging: A More Precise and Efficient Pruning Strategy for Florida Southern Highbush

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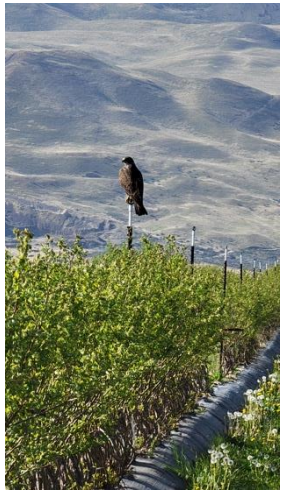
Why prune southern highbush blueberries?

- Balance vegetative growth and crop load
- Produce new fruiting wood
- Improve light penetration
- Renew old and unproductive canes
- Support berry size and uniform ripening
- Improve harvest and spray efficiency
- Maintain plant vigor and longevity

Florida pruning program begins immediately after harvest

Complete Harvest

Mechanical Hedge



Support health and re-growth

Maintain Irrigation and Nutrition

Monitor Chilli Thrips and Foliar diseases

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What transfers from northern highbush pruning?

- Fruit is produced on one-year-old wood.
- Strong new shoots are needed for future production.
- Old canes become less productive.
- Excessive crop load can reduce berry size.
- Dense canopies reduce light penetration.
- Weak, twiggy, crossing, and shaded wood contributes little.
- Regular cane renewal helps maintain plant productivity.


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Mechanical hedging strengths

- Rapidly reduces plant height
- Controls row width
- Stimulates vegetative regrowth
- Produces new fruiting wood
- Improves light penetration
- Improves equipment and worker access
- Removes some pest- and disease-affected tissue

Mechanical Hedging can not determine

- Which canes are the oldest
- Which canes are diseased
- Which branches are crossing
- Which shoots are too low
- Which interior branches are shaded
- Which canes should remain for structure
- Whether an individual plant is weak or vigorous

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Selective pruning should follow mechanical hedging

Harvest time

(April)

Hedge top + sides

(May - June)

Selective Pruning

(May - June)

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What to remove selectively

- Dead or diseased wood
- Broken canes
- Weak and twiggy interior growth
- Crossing and rubbing branches
- Low-spreading branches
- Canes growing toward the row middle
- Old, poorly productive canes
- Excess shoots crowding the plant crown
- Branches that interfere with mechanical harvesting

What to retain

- Strong upright canes
- Healthy new basal shoots
- Well-positioned lateral branches
- Productive one-year-old fruiting wood
- Enough foliage to support summer recovery
- A balanced distribution of wood through the canopy

Operational sequence

1. Mechanically hedge the block.
2. Walk the block and identify priority plants or rows.
3. Remove large structural problems first.
4. Remove old and unproductive canes.
5. Thin weak interior wood only as needed.
6. Retain enough healthy leaf area and strong regrowth.
7. Protect wounds promptly
8. Monitor regrowth and plant health through summer.

Successful pruning depends on postharvest plant recovery

After pruning, growers must protect:

- Pruning wounds
- Summer leaf area
- New shoot growth
- Irrigation uniformity
- Root-zone moisture
- Plant nutrition
- Foliage health
- Developing flower buds

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Labor is the limiting factor

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How can selective pruning become economically practical?

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The solution is not to abandon selective pruning. The solution is to make the selective pass:

- Faster
- More targeted
- Easier on workers
- More consistent
- Measurable economically

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Strategies

- Prune priority blocks rather than every block equally.
- Concentrate on mature or structurally problematic plants.
- Develop clear pruning standards for crews.
- Use visual examples and marked demonstration plants.
- Evaluate electric pruners for repetitive cane-renewal cuts.
- Maintain manual pruners for small precision cuts.
- Use loppers or saws for wood exceeding the electric tool's capacity.

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Study in Waldo Florida

Sharper established Feb 2025

Key take-home points

- Prune with a clear objective.
- Hedge promptly after harvest.
- Do not assume hedging completes the pruning process.
- Use selective pruning to remove wood the hedger cannot evaluate.
- Adjust pruning to cultivar, age, vigor, and harvest system.
- Protect wounds and summer leaf area.
- Evaluate electric pruners for labor efficiency—but make safety central.
- Measure the economics before recommending large-scale adoption.

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Thanks!

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