

Secrets of Pruning Roses

Pruning roses is easy and straightforward. It is not necessary to hard prune roses for good garden display, as it is for exhibiting roses, unless there is a lot of winter kill to the canes. The exhibitor is after specimen blooms for the show. The gardener is not. Hard pruning for exhibition necessitates heavy feeding to help the rose grow again. For the flower garden, the removal of about half the length of the old canes on rose bushes is sufficient. Trials conducted over the years have shown that the more foliage a rose carries, the better its performance.

Why Prune

Garden roses are pruned for three simple reasons: to control size and shape, to produce the most and the highest quality blooms, and to remove diseased and winter-damaged canes. It is usually worthwhile to reduce the height of tall bushes and shrubs by about a third in late November to avoid wind rock, especially in windy and exposed locations. Wind rock can create a small circular hole around the main stem of the rootstock. This exposes tender root structure to freezing weather. It also tears some of the fine feeder roots and may damage some main support roots.

Good thorn-resistant gloves and sharp pruning shears are essential tools. A pair of long-handled loppers and a pruning saw can be useful for cutting thick canes and stumps. The best pruning shears for roses are the bypass type rather than the anvil type.

When to Prune

An easy guide is to start pruning roses when the forsythia blooms in your neighborhood. Usually, this is around the first of March. Some years it can be as early as the February 20th, or as late as mid-March. Climbing roses should be pruned earlier. Any time from mid-January through early February is appropriate.

How to Prune

First, remove all dead, diseased, and damaged branches. Disease or weather damage usually appears as a dark discoloration in the pith of the cane. Remove sections ¼ inch above an outward-facing bud eye, going down the cane until the pith is cream colored like a fresh cut apple. Occasionally, this means removing the entire cane down to the crown. Each year, the oldest branch can be removed at its base, which promotes growth of a new cane. Reduce the length of the remaining canes by about half. Any remaining leaves should be removed. Then, remove all leaves and other pruning debris from the beds to help prevent disease.

Miniatures benefit from a lower pruning, to four to five inches from the ground, and the removal of older canes. They are vigorous growers and tend to respond with more new canes, producing superior flowers.

Neglected plants are usually inherited when people move into a previously owned house. It can be very difficult to identify the type of rose. If the roses cannot be identified, allow them to flower the first summer and then decide whether or not they are worth keeping. If the plants are to be retained, they can be pruned back by one-third of their normal height, removing all dead and diseased wood, and given fertilizer in May and again in July. They can be pruned more severely in future years.

Bush Roses

There is no need to differentiate between hybrid teas, grandifloras, floribundas, and miniatures. Don't be too concerned about pruning to outward facing buds. The buds are sometimes difficult to see, and any resulting dead wood can be cut off later. If cane borers are a neighborhood problem, a few days after pruning seal the ends of the canes with Elmer's glue, nail polish, or other sealant. Waiting a few days to seal the ends allows the sap to stop running.

Shrub Roses

Shrub roses such as Austin, new Generosas, the Romantica series, or other modern shrubs are becoming more popular, and with reason. These modern shrub roses are more disease resistant than the existing bush-type roses and usually produce more blooms per plant.

Shrub roses can be pruned in a number of ways. Some get as wide as they do tall and require pruning only of any canes that change the desired shape of the bush. A newly planted shrub requires removal of only the spent blooms for the first couple of seasons. Wait to see what form the bush will take. Then, in later years, just lightly trim and shape the bush to retain a pleasing appearance. Do remove dead and damaged wood and an occasional older cane as new canes appear.

Shrub roses that grow long floppy canes can be handled in different ways for a unique visual effect. Long slender canes, such as on the English rose "Graham Thomas", can be bent into a circular loop and the tips tied back near the base to make a three- to four-foot bush out of a six- or seven-foot bush. This type of long-caned shrub can also be trained as a climber.

Climbing Roses

Climbing roses are pruned very differently from bush and shrub-type roses. As the main canes grow out of the crown of the plant, gently train them down to a horizontal position. The canes can be tied to an open rail fence, to a trellis, or spiraled around a tower of one to two feet in diameter. The more horizontal canes, the more laterals, and the more blooms. Do not prune the main canes other than deadheading the blooms. After the first blooms at the ends of the main canes, new canes will spring up from buds where each leaf joins the horizontal canes. These new canes will grow to about 18 inches tall and are called lateral canes. The main canes may reach six to ten feet in one season. Rose blooms always appear at the ends of canes, so the second flush of bloom may have three to ten times as many blooms as the first.

The second season, do not cut any main canes. Cut each of the vertical-growing laterals back to two or three bud eyes each. Normally, this will leave vertical canes from 3 to 12 inches long, depending on the distance between leaf nodes on different varieties. Now each lateral cane will put out two to three times as many blooms as on the last cycle. After each bloom cycle, prune all laterals to two to three eyes. After about five years, having trained the new main canes from the crown alongside older canes, begin pruning the oldest main cane back to the crown or ground. Each year thereafter, prune the same number of old canes to the ground as the number of new canes that arose last season. From then on, prune all laterals down to two or three bud eyes each spring and after each bloom cycle.

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