

Get Your Gloves and Sharpen Your Pruners

by Bill Dorn, CR

One of the questions that I, as well as other consulting rosarians are often asked is a question about pruning roses. At first thought it can seem to be a daunting task and one filled with some confusion. Pruning does not have to be complicated or overwhelming. This article will be an attempt to keep things uncomplicated. I want to approach this important topic by answering three questions: 1. Why do we prune? 2. When do we prune? and 3. What do we prune?

Why do we prune our roses?

We must remember that roses are plants and as such they have an intricate chemical communication system within themselves. When we prune, we stimulate this communication system to start growing or to continue growing. Pruning provides the needed outside stress, a good stress that tells the plant to continue doing what it does best, to grow and produce canes, buds, flowers and seeds. Keep in mind that the nature of a rose bush is to position itself to produce seeds to continue perpetuating itself. What we most admire in the rose flower is nothing more than the rose's big advertisement attracting bees and other insects to help pollinate the flower.

When do we prune our roses?

There are two important times of the year when we prune our roses: spring and fall. For spring pruning we generally understand that after we see the forsythia bloom in our yards or out in public, it is time to begin spring pruning. Our roses have been dormant during the winter. As the soil warms up and spring rains nourish the roots, the rose bush will begin its wonderful chemical communication within itself. Fall pruning is a much simpler and straight forward task. After we see signs of the rose bush going into dormancy, i.e. after a few frosts sometime in late November in this area, it is time to fall prune and to mound the bush with soil or mulch as a winter blanket.

What do we prune on our rose bushes?

This is where things for some can become complicated, but it does not have to be so. Let's return to spring pruning. This is the time when we invest most of the effort. Here is a handy way to remember what to prune on the bush. It is called "The Six D's of Spring Pruning." These are:

Dead - Prune away all canes that are black and have no life in them. This happens often during winter. It is normal for a rose bush to have a certain amount of die-back.

Dinky - The word means "small and unimpressive." Prune canes smaller than the width of a pencil. The reason is that canes this small will not effectively support a bloom.

Diseased - Look for unusual growth or signs of the fungus blackspot on the cane. Yes, blackspot can infect the canes as well as the leaves and may have over-wintered.

Damaged - During the harshness of winter the winds may have broken a cane or even creased it. These need to be pruned away.

Diagonal - Look for canes that are growing across the path of another cane at an angle. This situation can cause two canes to rub together and produce damaging results.

Directional - When pruning canes look for the beginning new growth along the cane and prune 1/4 inch above the bud eyes that are pointing away from the bush. This is called "pruning above an outward-facing bud eye." This will help shape the bush and encourage growth that will keep the center of the bush open promoting better air circulation overall.

As we consider fall time pruning, it is much simpler. Prune your rose bushes to about waist high. Particularly look for very tall canes that can be whipped by winter winds if not pruned lower. Make sure you then mound your bushes with soil or mulch to help protect the bud union. In this area of Zone 5a to 6b, we plant the bud union at least 2-3 inches below ground. This protects the most vulnerable part of the bush and doing so will also add stability to the bush. So, mounding the bush will add additional protection. Roses can take cold temperatures, but they just do not like the variations of temperatures. Mounding seeks to insulate against this condition.

A final thought.

The information I have shared above can apply to hybrid tea, floribunda, grandiflora, miniature, and min-flora varieties. Some of you may have the climber varieties growing on trellises, fences or walls. These varieties need to be pruned differently. There are two types of canes on climbers: main canes growing from the base of the plant and lateral canes that grow off the main canes. We train the main canes on the trellis by weaving them back and forth on the trellis. Then from these main canes the lateral canes grow producing the flowers. It is safe to prune the lateral canes to about 12 inches. But do not prune the main canes. Each year we continue to train the main canes to grow on the trellis. Some main canes can grow to be 20 feet. For many climbers there will be growth and blooming on both new as well as old wood. If the bush blooms on only old wood (growth from previous seasons) then pruning should be delayed till after the first flush of roses. In either case, the basics of removing diseased or damaged wood still applies. If the specimen is older often it is wise to remove older main canes encouraging the newer growth. This rejuvenation will keep the climber healthy and blooming for decades.

I hope this information has been helpful. Feel free to reach out to any of our consulting rosarians for a free consultation. Also please join us at the end of this month and the beginning of April for two part free pruning workshop. The society will sponsor a two-part workshop on pruning. Part 1 will be held on March 28th beginning at 1:30 p.m. at the Mt Lebanon Public Library. Here you will learn more valuable information on pruning. Then on April 4th beginning at 1 p.m. we will continue the workshop at my garden with hands on one-to-one pruning instruction. Consulting rosarians will be on hand to show you how to prune and give you an opportunity to practice on a live bush in my garden. All you need to bring for Part 2 is a good pair of gloves and pruners. More about this workshop is printed in this newsletter.

Right: Good pruning yields good roses; Bill Dorn inspecting the climber 'New Dawn' in his garden.

