

An Easy Guide to Rose Pruning

Books are written on rose pruning. I contend it shouldn't be so complicated. Having grown hundreds of thousands of roses, my results prove it. I've found there are only three variations on pruning roses. Want mystique? Buy a book. Want easy? Read this.

In my opinion, the following apply to all roses:

- Cut your roses to harvest blooms and tidy up the plant. Most modern roses are repeat bloomers so whether you cut or you don't, you'll still get blossoms.
- It's good to prune roses back hard in late winter. It doesn't harm them: it helps them. Rose wood has a short life. They thrive on rejuvenation. Even climbers with wood that stays viable for years eventually decline and are "re-born" by giving them a brutal cut.
- I don't get hung up on bud-counting or slicing-angles. For me, these "trade secrets" amount to little more than silly, hair-splitting nonsense designed to increase the aura of mystery. And as for wound dressings, I never found them beneficial so I don't bother.
- As to timing the pre-spring pruning, leaves drop between late fall and early winter. That's a sign that active top-growth has ceased and carbohydrates have transmuted their storage back into stems and roots. From this date till break of spring, the timing is appropriate for pruning. Do it in December, January or February: makes no difference as long as it's after leaf drop and prior to bud break in spring.
- It goes without saying, any dead wood should be removed. Diseases lie in wait on dried leaves and old branches so you want to get rid of those potential trouble makers. Once you're done pruning, rake the debris and discard them.

So, let's get past the baloney and see how simple this is

Simply this. Your pruning technique depends on the habit of your rose, and that's one of only three possibilities:

1. caned
2. shrubby
3. climbing

Caned Types

Tea roses (Exhibition or Cutting roses) make long-stemmed individual blooms like what you'd see at the florist. They grow upright, 4-7'. Grandifloras are nearly identical but cluster-blooming. Floribundas (Little Landscaping roses), fall into this pruning group, too. Their flowers are similar to the teas but clustered like the grands and grow about two-thirds the size of the others, usually 3-4'.

All caned roses are treated alike in regards to pre-spring pruning. Whack the whole plant back to 12-15" above the base. Use shears, loppers, clippers: whatever works. Next, visually select out 3-5 of the fattest, freshest looking canes to retain. Ideally these should be away from the center of the plant and away from one another,

making for maximum air and sun and minimal crowding. Cut all the other canes off completely, to the base. Then remove all the side branches from your 3-5 selected canes. You should be left with 3-5 lone separated canes about 12-15" high. Now that wasn't so difficult, was it?

Shrubby Types

Shrub roses (aka Shrub & Hedge roses) grow dense and twiggy. They branch heavily and grow 4-6' tall. Blooms are clustered, smaller and unsophisticated in form. (I predict hybridizers will breed magnificent blooms into shrub roses, at which time we'll get the best of both worlds: beauty with simplified maintenance.) Groundcovers roses are shrubs roses, too, only lower and spreading. Rugosas (Seaside & Cottage roses) are similar to shrubs in that they are shrubby-caned and many-branched.

Trimming shrub roses is totally optional. You can trim or not, very hard or just a little, any time except during fall. Use shears, electric trimmers, chain saws, whatever works. Don't fuss over the canes. Just whack the whole bush into a shape that pleases you. You won't hurt it! Whether you trim or not, once every 3-5 years they'll need a rejuvenation cut: take them back almost to their base. They'll come back fast and bloom like crazy.

Climbing Types

Known as Ramblers or Arbor, Trellis & Pillar roses, these are simply tall caned roses (typically 8-15' when let go) with sprawling stems and relatively long-lived wood. They're naturals for training and attaching to structures.

A general guide is to do minimal pruning for three years, then a severe pruning the fourth. You don't have to keep track of it: just watch how the plant is doing. If it seems to decline, the next winter will be the time for a hard pruning. Most years, just cut out the dead wood and do a little thinning so branches don't crowd one another. Then for the hard prune year, go in and seriously remove the oldest looking main stems and do severe thinning. You can even thin out annually if you want to but it's not really necessary.

Finally, I hope this helps simplify what I always considered a pompous, blown-out-of-proportion, purposely-over-complicated process. Gardening should be fun science, not rocket science. Go out and enjoy your easy roses.