

Pruning Roses: What You Need To Know

Great Pruning Leads To Great Roses



Why Prune?

We prune to regulate size, shape and to help our roses bloom more. Pruning can also be used for disease prevention and even as a treatment for many common ailments. Pruning can even help rejuvenate an old rose. In general, almost all roses benefit from regular pruning. They are far sturdier plants than people give them credit.

Best Time Of Year

In the past, it has been traditional to do major rose pruning in the fall. This is not wrong, and remains pertinent to winterizing tender roses, however, things are changing. If one wants to do their pruning, while winterizing their rose, they must wait until the rose has gone dormant. A hard frost or even several might be required for the rose to go dormant, which in some cases may be as late as December. If one prunes too early, the rose may be stimulated to grow more. The soft new growth is tender and will likely die resulting in the rose going into the winter in a weakened state. Generally, it is safer now for hardy roses to only receive a very light fall pruning; and performing ones hard pruning in the spring. This is a fairly narrow window between the leaf buds beginning to swell and before they get to be 1/4 inch long. A good indicator, in many areas, is to prune your bushes when the yellow forsythia starts to bloom.

The conversation about when to prune inevitably leads to when not to prune. This can vary from rose to rose and as one gets to know theirs, they can start making this call for themselves. That being said the biggest folly of many new rosarians is to prune heavily after mid-summer. This encourages a lot of late season growth that may not harden off in time for winter.

Don't prune your rose until it is mature

Until your new bush gets established, you shouldn't do a hard spring pruning at all. For most roses, wait until the second or third spring. Don't forget that a rose needs to develop enough roots before it will be vigorous. If a rose is grown in poor soil or not watered enough, it may never attain a mature vigor or size. In those cases, the bush needs all of the canes it has in order to survive.

Pruning different types of roses

All modern roses have some very basic pruning needs. The three "D's" are Dead, Diseased and Damaged. These should be pruned out immediately. Below you will find a break down on how to prune different types of roses, but first is always the three "Ds". One should also keep up deadheading, which is the removal of spent flowers, through the season. The less energy a plant puts into forming seeds the more it will have for new blossoms. Deadheading should be discontinued in September so the rose can get ready to go dormant. .

Shrub Roses: Shrub roses are by far the simplest type of rose to prune. In-fact, they may not need pruning at all. Shrub roses should be selected with their adult size in mind. If the rose is well established and gets too large, one can simply cut it back by roughly 50% in early spring. Don't over think it, the roses shrubby habit will fill out any mistakes you make. As part of any pruning you should remove the spindly or scrubby canes. If the rose is quite old, pruning out the grey unproductive canes can also help rejuvenate the shrub. Dead wood should always be cut out. Dead wood can harbor and over winter diseases, although with shrub roses this is less of a concern. One can continue pruning, to a lesser degree, up until midsummer in order to maintain a neat habit. It is often combined with the deadheading process.

Formal Roses: Mostly defined by habit, some examples are Floribundas and Old Roses. They share many of the pruning needs of the shrub roses; Cut the rose back by roughly 50% and remove any spindly growth in early spring. Dead wood should be cut out as well. Now, this is where things start getting different. It is ideal to keep the center of the rose relatively open so that the shrub has plenty of room to breathe. One should use extra care to clear out the scrubby canes in the center of the shrub. Also when pruning back the rose try to select eye nodes facing outward from the center of the rose. The emerging canes will grow in the direction the eye was facing. If too many canes cross the center of the shrub it may become congested and promote fungal diseases.

Hybrid Tea Roses: Hybrid tea roses are a specific subset of formal roses. Their spring pruning needs are the same as other roses, although they may have more dead canes that will need to be pruned out. Hybrid teas are more tender than other roses and are generally pruned and winterized in the fall. Later, during the growing season; people refer to the “rule of 5”, meaning prune back to the first leaf that has five leaflets. This can be confusing because some roses varieties only have 3; while others may have up to 15. Instead, prune back to just above a full leaf where the resulting new growth won’t cross the center of the shrub. New growth usually buds from the eye at the base of the leaf and grows in a similar direction.

Climbing Roses: Climbing roses can get quite tall. They prefer to bloom on second year growth, so the pruning is different. An ideal situation, for a moderately sized climbing rose, should have five or six healthy canes going up. The size and maturity of the rose should also be taken into consideration; a larger or older rose may have more. Maintaining this is actually quite simple. Every few years cut the oldest cane down to the ground, new ones should grow up to replace it eventually. The old brittle wood turns grey and often doesn’t produce that well; In addition to removing underperforming canes, it will help rejuvenate the shrub. Scrubby canes at the base of the shrub, that are not inclined to go up, should be removed. As with all roses, the dead and damaged wood needs to be removed. Making sure the rose is tied up well will help canes avoid damage and subsequent pruning.

Pruning and disease management

Pruning can also be a powerful tool to help control diseases. As previously stated, maintaining an open habit helps the rose ward off fungal diseases by maintaining good airflow. Catching an outbreak early can be as simple as cutting off one leaf before it has a chance to spread. If a topical fungus gets out of hand, often the first step in treatment is to remove the most heavily infested leaves and canes before product treatment. Pruning can also be used to cut out ailments such as rose canker, which can spread rapidly if left unchecked.

This is also a good time to mention good pruning hygiene. With ailments like rose canker it is increasingly important to sterilize one’s sheers. Making clean cuts, and not spreading any diseases further, is a necessity. After pruning, sterilize your sheers by leaving the blades in rubbing alcohol for a few minutes. If an outbreak is bad enough, it may be necessary to prune out the majority of the infection, sterilize your sheers, and then go back to make clean cuts. Sanitary wipes can also be used out in the field for hands and blades. When choosing cleansers, make sure the product does not have bleach in it; bleach can “pit” your sheers and make hiding places for contaminants. For lesser ailments, like powdery mildew, all this may not be necessary but it is always good to practice good hygiene.