

ROSE PRUNING

The attention given to pruning details can be the difference between a successful rose garden and a big mess. Roses require certain methods of pruning to look their best, but once you know about those methods and why they are necessary, it all makes a lot of sense. What follows is everything you will ever need to know about pruning roses (and then some).

Prune Heavily -

Roses thrive on heavy pruning, and it is very necessary to keep them healthy and productive. Many people are afraid to cut a rose back as far as is necessary. Just remember, roses are one of the most resilient plants around, and they should not be viewed in the same way as a normal shrub. You could almost think of them as a perennial, getting cut back severely every year and putting on all new growth every year.

General Rules-

Timing: In our mild climate timing is not as crucial as it may be elsewhere. You can do major pruning on a rose at almost any time of the year, but with most roses you should always do one major pruning in winter to start things off right for the next year. One way to do this is to cut the plants to about waist high in fall after the leaves drop, because this prevents stress breakage in the winter. Then, do your more precise pruning in February or March, just when you start to see the buds breaking.

Inward or Outward facing bud?: When making a cut, it is best to cut to just above a bud that points outwards from the center of the plant. If there are leaves on the plant, cut to just above a set of leaves that point outward. The bud you cut to will be the new dominant shoot, and will go in the direction that the bud faces. By cutting to an outward facing bud, you direct growth outward and away from other stems. Inward facing growth runs together, stifling air movement and making a nice hideaway for bugs and diseases.

Angle of cut: You want to cut the stem at a 45-degree angle about 1/2 inch above the bud. Too flat of a cut will allow water to settle and could cause rot, while too steep of an angle can expose too much wood. While not the most critical element in rose pruning, you should pay attention to how you are making your cuts.

Weed out inferior growth: A solid structure is necessary for a solid plant. Roses will often send out extraneous growth that does nothing but take up energy, or have diseased stems which just harbor problems. In general, it is a good idea to remove any shoots that go off in strange directions or at odd angles. Any growth that seems weak or diseased and less robust than the rest of the growth should be removed. For larger plants like hybrid teas, weak growth is usually considered anything with a diameter smaller than a pencil. And any growth that crosses over other growth or runs through the center of the plant is also a candidate for removal.

Specific Pruning Groups-

Hybrid Tea: Heavy pruning is the most important thing. These bloom on new growth, so the more you prune, the newer growth comes to produce flowers. As flowers fade, cutting them off or "deadheading" will bring new blooms along in a hurry. When deadheading, always cut the stem down to just above a set of five leaflets. Most roses will have a few sets of three leaflets below the flower, but cutting to these only gives you a 50% chance of a new flower from that bud. A set of five leaflets will usually give you close to 100% re-bloom. Winter pruning looks tough, but is actually easy. Cut out anything smaller than a pencil, anything that looks diseased, and anything that is more than 3 or 4 years old. Then pick three to four of the healthiest stems, and cut everything else out. Take the remaining stems down to about 12" above the graft union, making sure to cut to out-facing buds. For anyone nervous about this, keep in mind that rose stems are only able to produce flowers for about 3-4 years before they become inefficient. It's new growth that you want, and your plants will supply it with some simple direction from you.

Grandiflora: Same as hybrid teas.

Floribunda: Same as hybrid teas, but the general number of stems to end up with is 4-6.

Rugosa: These can either just be thinned of dead and diseased wood, or they can be sheared yearly for a more compact habit. They really don't need as much pruning as other types, just minor maintenance and an occasional major pruning for rejuvenation.

Miniature: Miniature roses are a little bit different from other roses in that they are not pruned as heavily. Generally, you should thin them down to about 6 major stems, and then shear them about in half. On smaller plants you may just want to shear the plant so that it is even all around so that you are actually left with something. Be careful not to butcher smaller plants though, especially in winter, as they don't recover as fast as bigger types. You should wait for spring to prune heavily so the plants can re-grow.

Trees: Find out what kind of rose it is, and prune accordingly. There really is no difference between a tree form and a shrub form for pruning, except of course for the height difference.

Climbing: This takes a little thought. There are two main types of climbers - those that bloom once in spring, and those that bloom more than once in the spring-summer season. Those that bloom only once in spring bloom on the previous year's growth, so winter pruning would not be recommended. With these, it is best to prune right after they bloom. The other type, that blooms a few times, blooms on newer wood, and so may be pruned any way you wish. Generally, these will bloom in spring, then send up all new shoots that will carry the next batch of flowers. The shoots that are finished blooming may be removed entirely. Regardless of how you prune them, they will still flower just fine. A few rules hold true for all the climbers. First of all, remember that old growth is only productive for 3-4 years. If you have an arbor or trellis, you may want to let the plants get larger canes to cover, which would involve letting them grow for a few years. After a while though, you will end up with blooms at the very top of the structure, and not much on the sides. For this reason, you should selectively thin out the oldest canes every once in a while to keep it going. Also, for massive amounts of bloom, tie the stem tips down so that they point towards the ground. This will cause all of the buds by the leaf groups to break and flower, giving you flowers all along the stem!

Shrubs: Although this is a big group, the general rule is that pruning is only necessary as you see fit to shape the plant. It is a good idea to thin the plants every once in a while, and general shearing is very acceptable. If you do not prune regularly, it may become necessary to do some major rejuvenation pruning every several years.

Tips and Tricks-

Bigger Flowers: Often, roses will start to form several buds at the end of a stem. For bigger roses, pick off all but the biggest bud as they are still forming. The plant will then divert its energy to that remaining bud and push it to become one huge flower!

More Flowers: For roses like climbers, and others with long, sprawling stems, you can trick the plant into throwing more buds by pulling the end of the stem down so it points to the ground.

Perpetual Flowers: On everblooming roses like hybrid teas, be sure to deadhead. When deadheading, always cut to a group of five leaves. By doing this, you can get your plants to produce constant flowers from spring through frost!