



Why Do We Prune Roses?

by Anne Skinner, UCCE Master Gardener

The basics of rose pruning are science based. Once learned, these basics require a fair amount of time and labor. Additionally, a certain degree of artistry is required. The resulting beautiful flowers are definitely a reward, but why do we take on this gardening task?

A rose bush will survive without an annual pruning during its dormant period. It will, however, become a weak, poorly-shaped plant with smaller blooms. It will look neglected and be prone to pests and diseases. Pruning removes dead and diseased canes and triggers new buds to push at the base so that new vigorous canes can form.

The basics of rose pruning are not difficult to learn, and unlike a tree, roses will rarely be permanently damaged during the learning process. One important feature to learn is identifying the anatomy of the rose bush. Other than old-fashioned roses or many miniature roses, most rose bushes are a combination of a rootstock variety grafted to a desirable rose flower variety. Pruning off the grafted portion of the bush down to the graft union will result in the vigorous rootstock taking over, and there will not be the anticipated blooms of the desirable variety. The rootstock is chosen for its vigor or disease resistance, but will often produce a large shrub with small flowers.



Pruning Basics

1. Use sharp, clean, by-pass pruning shears and long-handled lopping shears.
2. Remove small twiggy growth and dead, diseased or crossing canes.
3. Remove suckers by digging down to their start below the bud union and pulling them off.
4. Remove canes in the center of the plant to create a vase shape.
5. Choose 3-6 healthy outside canes per plant to keep, and leave 3-5 buds on each cane.
6. The new shoot will grow in the direction the top bud points, so try to cut to an outside bud. Cut on a diagonal about ¼ inch above the bud.
7. Remove every leaf from the newly pruned bush. Clean all leaves and debris away from the base of the plant.
8. Consider applying an insecticidal soap or horticultural oil after pruning and while the rose is dormant. Soaps and oils smother overwintering scales and insect eggs; they are also the least harmful products to beneficial insects.
9. Apply a layer of mulch at least 2-3 inches deep over the garden, keeping it away from the base of the plant.
10. Four to six weeks after pruning, apply a fertilizer recommended for roses just prior to rainfall, or water deeply after application.

You can review the pruning basics here and look up "Ten Steps to Beautiful Roses" on the Master Gardener web site:

<http://cetulare.ucanr.edu> (click on "Master Gardeners" and then "Roses"). From this page you can access several rose-related topics and archived newspaper articles, as well as additional care tips available from UC Integrated Pest Management.



However, reading articles will not give you the same confidence and technique as coming out to a hands-on demonstration, where Master Gardeners will be pruning hybrid teas, floribundas, grandifloras and miniature roses! You can bring your pruners and gloves, and work along with Master Gardeners to really gain a feel for the pruning process and to have your specific questions answered.

I had the privilege of watching and working with a legendary Master Gardener, Norm Phillips, before he passed away. I learned something new each time I watched him. There are basic pruning techniques, but rose bushes do not always grow just like the picture in a book. You may also want to prune your bush in a shape to suit its location in your garden. There is definitely a degree of artistry to pruning roses!

I hope to see you at an upcoming pruning demonstration!

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