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ADVICE TO GROW BY » MASTER GARDENERS

Prune your roses smartly to encourage fresh blooms and curing chicken manure

Question: My roses have quit blooming. When and how should I prune them?

Answer: You can prune roses during their dormant period, or as soon as the leaf buds start to emerge. In our hardiness zone 9 climate, that is January and February. The reasons for pruning — to remove dead, diseased or damaged limbs and suckers; open the plant for good air circulation and encourage the next season's growth — dictate how you prune.

Most importantly, always start with sharp loppers and pruning shears you have cleaned with a solution of one part bleach to nine parts water. Clean your tools again between plants to avoid spreading diseases caused by pathogens, which are common among roses.

There are many types of roses, each with its own growth characteristics. Before you begin pruning, determine what type of rose you have. Floribundas produce abundant, smaller blooms on outward-spreading stems. Hybrid tea roses produce one large, tulip-shaped bloom on each straight, almost vertical stem. Grandiflora is a term used to describe a new rose developed from a cross between hybrid tea and floribunda roses. Grandifloras tend to carry their flowers in clusters on top of tall stems.

Old garden roses, or heritage roses, are similar to floribundas, but they produce flowers on old wood. If you prune them in January, they won't produce any roses. Instead, prune them right after they finish blooming. Prune your climbing roses just to keep them where you want them. No special technique is needed.

Begin to prune by removing the three D's: dead, diseased and damaged branches. Cut them back to green, healthy tissue. Consider rose branches diseased if you see black spots, white powder or rust-colored areas on the leaves or if black, gray or brown branches break off easily. Remove any remaining leaves; old leaves are harbingers of diseases and overwintering insects. Dispose of diseased leaves and branches in the trash bin, not in your compost pile or the city green waste container.

Cut back suckers, those flexible green stems that come from the base of the plant, to below the soil level.

Now you can start to shape your plant, always aiming to achieve an open center. Plan to take your rose down by about one-third to one-half its total height.

First, remove any branches that cross over the midline or touch other branches. Then remove any branches thinner than a pencil. Take each branch you remove back to its origin point. Remove any canes — the stems that come up from the ground — from the center of the plant, leaving a circle of four to seven canes.

Lastly, make the pruning cuts that will promote new growth. For hybrid tea varieties, look at each cane and locate the dormant buds. At this stage, the buds are just slight swellings on the canes, but they indicate where the new buds will emerge. Make a 45-degree cut about $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch above the third or fourth bud from the origin of the branch. This allows for bud failure; if a new bud fails to emerge, there will be more buds below it. You don't need to seal the stump.

If you wait a few weeks, until green shoots start to emerge from the buds, you'll have the luxury of choosing to prune $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch above an outward-facing bud, which will make it easier to get the desired vase shape.

On shrub roses or floribundas, you don't need to be so picky about where to make pruning cuts. After you've attended to the three Ds and removed any suckers, you can simply bring them down by about a third of their height with hedge clippers.

In the summer, you can deadhead the spent roses of any rose variety to encourage a second flush of blooms. Just cut the stem down to $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch above an outward-facing shoot with five leaves.

For more tips on pruning roses, with illustrations, visit these websites:

Our Rose Garden, University of Illinois: <https://bit.ly/3qcziYU>

Pruning Roses, New York Botanic Garden: <https://bit.ly/3wljijR>

Question: How long do I need to cure chicken manure before putting in my garden beds? And when is the best time of year to do it?

Answer: One of chickens' best contributions to a garden is their manure. One hen can produce 1 cubic foot of manure every six months — good news for any home gardener!

Animal manures can provide essential nutrients and organic matter that improve garden soil structure, aeration and water retention. Of the 17 nutrients most plants need for healthy growth and development, manures from chickens, horses and cows can provide them all. However, avoid using manures from dogs, cats and pigs on your food garden, as they can contain harmful parasites.

Out of a typical chicken coop comes not just solid manure but also urine, feathers and undigested food. Chicken manure is high in nitrogen, but in large amounts, it can burn plants. It is essential to first compost the manure and then cure it. Composting decreases the ammonia content, kills off pathogens and stabilizes the nutrients, making them readily available to plants.

In contrast, simply letting chicken manure sit and dry out does not kill off pathogens, although the lack of moisture diminishes their number.

To compost chicken manure, mix the manure and bedding with food scraps, plant trimmings and leaves. Make sure your additions are small pieces, ideally 1 to 2 inches. By volume, the pile should be half browns — items that provide carbon, such as dry leaves and shredded paper — and half greens — items that provide nitrogen, such as food scraps, manure and plant trimmings. Add water to the pile and turn the materials every few days with a tool to introduce oxygen.

You want your compost pile to get hot, preferably between 130 and 150 degrees, and stay hot for at least three days. After three days, stir the compost pile and let it reheat for three more days. Repeat the stirring and reheating process at least three times, to ensure any pathogens are killed off.

After composting, cover the pile and let it cure for 45 days. Curing at ambient temperatures allows soil bugs and worms to further digest organic matter.

Any time of year is good to add organic matter to our soils, but the best time to spread soil amendments is in the fall. The winter rains can do the work of infiltrating the nutrients down through the soil, to build it up for spring planting and the heavier growing season.

Before planting, give the composted manure time to partially decompose and for excess mineral salts to leach away from the root zone. A general rule is to add composted chicken manure to the soil at least 90 days before planting trellised crops, such as tomatoes or beans, and at least 120 days before planting root vegetables.

Never apply fresh chicken manure to growing food crops. Chicken manure may harbor pathogens such as E. coli, salmonella and cryptosporidium. Wear protective gloves when handling chicken manure and keep it in a protected area that children, pets and livestock can't access.

For more information, visit these websites:

Composting Chicken Manures: <https://bit.ly/3H5BIOQ>

Compost and Manure Food Safety: <https://bit.ly/3mZrKq6>

Contributors to this week's column were Patricia Decker, Karen Felker, Jennifer Roberts and Patricia Rosales. Send your gardening questions to scmqpd@gmail.com. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County

(sonomamg.ucanr.edu) provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. The Master Gardeners will answer in the newspaper only questions selected for this column. Other questions may be directed to their Information Desk: 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.