

Pruning roses for health and beauty...



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Most roses need some amount of pruning to keep them attractive and productive in your garden or landscape. Much of this pruning activity is done during the mid-winter while bushes are largely dormant and have much less foliage. This allows a good look at the bush's cane structure *and* a great chance to make corrections. Many gardeners approach this mid-winter pruning with trepidation and fear. Others approach with pruners cutting indiscriminately—oftentimes doing more damage than good. The following guidance will be helpful for most types of roses, though it is wise to check into the correct timing for pruning in your area and the correct pruning strategy for the specific types of roses in your garden.

Basic pruning equipment:

Most rose pruning should be done with hand pruners. Use a “by-pass” style pruner rather than an “anvil” style pruner. Though by-pass style pruners generally cost a bit more, they make a *much* cleaner cut than an anvil style pruner. Canes ½–1 inch in diameter should be cut with by-pass style loppers. A small, folding pruning saw is very useful in removing very large canes—especially in tight places *and* near a bud union. A good pair of heavy leather work gloves to protect hands is a must. Gloves with long gauntlets to protect wrists and forearms are even better. If you have a lot of roses and need to kneel a lot to prune, you might consider investing in knee pads—especially the type with hard plastic forming the protective pad.



How to make good pruning cuts:

Making good pruning cuts is important when pruning

many different kinds of plants, and is particularly important when pruning roses during the dormant season. Well placed, clean pruning cuts greatly reduce the incidence of cane canker disease. Cane canker disease is the leading cause of deadwood in rose bushes. The causal agents of cane canker are weak fungal pathogens that enter and infect rose canes through pruning cuts and other physical damage to canes—especially during the dormant season. Once the disease pathogen has a foothold, it moves down the cane killing it. Healthy canes—normally green or russet-colored—change to red and/or purple as the disease progresses down the cane. Dead portions of canes eventually turn black or brown in color. If one looks closely at dead canes in a rose bush, the cause will most often be identified as a misplaced, poorly executed pruning cut!

Make all cuts with *sharp* pruners or loppers. When “heading-back” canes, place the pruners about ¼ inch above the bud eye and slope the cut at a 45 degree angle with the bud eye at the high side of the cut.

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Basic rose terms:

As in any endeavor, it helps to be knowledgeable in the basic terminology. Here's a list of common rose terms:

“**Cane**” refers to the stems or branches of a rose bush. Canes can be quite stiff or somewhat flexible depending on the rose variety.

“**Bud union**” refers to the large swelling at the base of a rose produced by a propagation method called “budding” (similar to grafting). The major canes of the bush originate from this point to form the basic structure of the plant.

“**Scion**” refers to the top portion of a rose bush propagated by budding at and above the bud union. The scion is the rose variety that you purchased ('Peace,' 'Queen Elizabeth,' etc.).

“**Rootstock**” refers to the root system of a rose bush propagated by budding. In most cases the rootstock is actually a *different type of rose than*

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When “thinning-out” a cane, cut as closely as possible to the point of origin of the cane, leaving no stub of the cane left behind. Cuts do not need to be coated with pruning paint—make the cut correctly and the wound will heal quickly, thus protecting itself from disease pathogens. Be particularly careful when pruning at the bud union of budded roses. Incidence of cane canker disease in this area can destroy the plant or weaken it severely.

Pruning roses for health and beauty—an organized approach:

Ask ten rosarians about how to prune and you will likely get ten different views. With this in mind, let's look at the *basic objectives* of pruning roses that most rosarians would agree on:

- Removal of weak, dead, and diseased canes.
- Removal of distorted (crooked or twisted) canes and conflicting (or crossing) canes.
- Open-up the center of the plant to allow air and sunlight to penetrate.
- Shape and direct growth appropriate for the type/variety of the plant.
- To maintain a good balance of older and younger growth appropriate to the type/variety, health and age of the plant, and usage of the plant (i.e. general landscape, specimen, cutflower, etc.).

Keeping the above objectives in mind, here's a four-step, organized approach to pruning roses:

Step 1. Evaluate the bush to identify healthy canes. Healthy canes will typically be green, russet-colored, or tan depending on the variety, and should not appear shriveled or dry (as in many things there are some exceptions here). At this point, just note the healthy canes and *leave them alone for now*.

Step 2. Identify unhealthy canes and thin-out back to healthy growth. Remove all dead and diseased wood, blind shoots, and crossing/crooked canes. Removal of some old canes may also be desirable, if there are a sufficient number of healthy canes.

Step 3. Thin-out “excess” healthy canes. If a plant is growing well and has many healthy canes, excess

Basic rose terms (continued):

the scion. Rootstocks of budded roses can be prone to sucker, sending up canes that are quite different from the scion. Suckers should be removed *whenever* they develop.

“**Own-root**” refers to a rose bush propagated from cuttings of the desired variety. They differ from budded roses in that the top and root system of the bush are the *same* variety. Many old roses and some modern shrub roses are propagated this way.

“**Thin-out**” refers to the removal of a cane to its point of origin at a larger cane, the bud union, the crown of the plant or another large cane.

“**Head-back**” refers to the shortening of a cane by cutting at a single “bud eye.” Heading-back usually leaves all or most canes cut at the same height above ground level. An “extreme” example of heading-back is using power hedge clippers to prune bushes.

“**Bud eye**” refers to the new shoot buds which lie along the canes of a rose bush, just above the points of leaf attachment (petioles). Bud eyes are the point at which a new cane will arise.

“**Blind shoot**” refers to short (4 inches or less), spindly canes usually produced within the interior and lower portions of a rose bush. Blind shoots do not produce blooms, usually have small and distorted foliage, do not grow, and generally serve no useful function for the plant. They also are ideal hiding places for pests and disease.

canes may be thinned-out to open-up the center of the bush to allow better sunlight penetration and airflow through the plant.

Step 4. Head-back remaining healthy canes. Remaining healthy canes are headed-back to an appropriate height for the variety, health and age of the bush, and usage of the plant. Generally, most old roses and modern shrub roses are headed-back by removing about a third of the bush's original height. Hybrid teas and grandifloras are headed-back to 8–15 inches for cutflower/exhibition, 15–24 inches for combination cutflower/landscape usage, and 24–36 inches for landscape usage.