



## Contribution Information Sheet

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Abstract: This short article covers an explanation of the pruning process, the why of pruning, the timing for pruning, the equipment you need, how to do it (the process of pruning), the final steps, and helping the reader feel better after a serious pruning session.

This article is an ARS Award of Merit Winner.

# **Rose Pruning Made Easy**

by Cindy Dale, Consulting Rosarian

Pruning seems to give gardeners more problems than any other rose-growing task. When to prune, how much to take off, where to make the cut; all of these questions and more swim around in the gardener's head as they face their overgrown rose bushes, pruners in hand.

## **What is the Purpose of Pruning?**

The purposes of pruning rose bushes are: to remove dead, spindly, or weak growth which concentrates the plant's energy and promotes bigger blooms, to shape the bush into a more attractive form, and to open up the center of the bush to allow light to penetrate into the center and air to circulate. This, in turn, decreases the incidence of fungal diseases such as blackspot, and powdery mildew.

## **When Do We Prune and What Equipment is Used?**

Roses in Georgia should be pruned in late February to early March right before they break dormancy. Once-blooming old garden roses should be lightly pruned *after* the spring bloom. Cuts should be made with a high-quality and very sharp pair of pruning shears such as Fiskars, Corona or, my personal favorite, Felco, which is made in Switzerland, has replaceable blades, and comes in right and left-handed models. Top quality pruners will cost more up front but will reward you with ease of use and long life. Loppers are used to cut thick canes, and a pruning saw may be necessary to cut the thickest, woody canes flush with the bud union. Elbow-length, thick, leather gloves are a must to prevent getting stuck by thorns which reminds me to remind you to keep your tetanus shot up to date.

## **How is Rose Pruning Done?**

The first procedure is to remove all dead wood. Then, starting with the long canes on the outer edges, work your way around the bush, reducing Hybrid Teas and Grandifloras by 1/2 to 2/3 of their original height. Shrub roses, Climbers, and Floribundas need much lighter pruning. Weak, spindly growth that is smaller than the size of a pencil on the main canes should be removed as well as canes crossing the center, to open up the middle. The finished bush should be about 2-3 feet tall, have 3-6 strong canes, and resemble a big vase with canes arching upwards on all sides and an open center.

Pruning cuts are made downward at a 45 degree angle about 1/4 - inch above an outward-facing bud eye. Bud eyes are small, half-moon shaped, reddish swellings that are present at intervals up and down the cane on all sides. This is where the new, stem growth will come from, which is why you pick an outward-facing bud eye so that the new stems do not grow into the center. When the cut is made you should see healthy, white tissue

in the cane's center. If brown, dead tissue is seen, cut above the next lower, outward bud eye until you get below the dead area, even if it means completely taking that particular cane off.

Some rosarians recommend that pruning cuts be sealed with a thin layer of school glue to prevent cane borers from entering but I have never had much of a problem with these insects and have not sealed my canes in recent years. All leaves still left on the plant from the previous season should be removed since they may harbor diseases that lasted through the winter. All debris around the bush should be removed for the same reason.

### **What Else Needs to be Done?**

Remove any suckers. Suckers are canes growing from below the bud union which is the large, knobby area that the main canes arise from. This is where your rose variety was budded onto a hardy rootstock and the suckers represent unwanted, rootstock growth that probably will not bloom, and if it does, will bear no resemblance to the blooms that you bought the bush for. Unchecked suckers will eventually take over the bush, weakening it, and suppressing the variety budded onto it. They must be removed cleanly and flush with the shank, or main cane, below the bud union to prevent regrowth.

The last step is to scrub the woody epidermis of the bud union with a wire brush to remove any dead tissue and allow the new, basal growth to emerge from the bud union, forming new canes which are the lifeblood of your rose bush.

### **Egads, What Have I Done!??**

Don't be shocked by the smallness of your newly pruned bush. It's normal and badly needed for all the reasons mentioned above. When I think back to the first year I pruned, I was sure I had killed the bushes but 8 weeks later they were tall, blooming, and healthy just as they were meant to be. Remember, "You have to be cruel to be kind." Moderate to heavy pruning may seem cruel at first but you're really being much kinder to the rose bush in the long run.