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Pruning Your Roses

“When in Doubt Cut It Out”

By Sam Jones, Master Rosarian

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Pruning is the most important thing you can do “above ground” for beautiful roses! But don’t let that bold claim scare you away, because the worst thing you can do is not to prune at all. The second worst is to prune too little. After that, it’s all uphill. It’s a matter of fine-tuning what you do. Regardless of what you have heard or feared, you won’t destroy a healthy rose plant by pruning it too much – unless you whack it below the crown (bud union), in which case, only digging it up (“shovel pruning”) helps. Sometimes the most vigorous growth occurs after a freeze has forced you to strike it down almost to the crown. Roses are tough. Most benefit from almost any kind of pruning, so relax. You won’t lose it by cutting it, and you will probably help it. When you lose a rose, look for what else is wrong – weather, soil, or plant – but not pruning.

Dick Steeper recently wrote that “the object” of pruning is for the rose “to renew itself” (San Diego Rose Society, Rose Ramblings, January 2007). To obtain roses with long stems and beautiful form, he reminds us that we want hybrid teas to renew themselves from the bud union (the graft-union or swelling connecting your rose variety to the vigorous rootstock underground). They should be pruned more heavily. Miniature and mini-flora roses are treated as scaled down hybrid teas. But for maximizing bush size and

profusion of blooms on shorter stems, other roses (like floribundas and shrubs) should be pruned less severely. Climbers are pruned differently. Old garden roses and other one-time bloomers should be pruned mainly after their annual blooming cycle.

Let's start with hybrid teas – including grandifloras (a modern classification of full-size bushes having floribunda tendencies for clusters of blooms). In very early spring [**late February to mid-March in Atlanta**], first, remove all older and unproductive canes, not from the top down, but from the ground up. This means not standing up with your shears, but kneeling or sitting where you can look down at the bud union.

Top exhibitor from Arizona, Bob Martin, says pruning begins at the base of the bush, not “nibbling away” at the top like “barbers giving their roses a trim.” (“Ten Principles of Rose Pruning,” Rose Exhibitor’s Forum) Leave alone the newer, smoother, and greener “main” canes – growing from, or near, the bud union. Canes that are darker (gray-brown), cracking, or peeling, remove as close to the crown as you can. Stubs left near the base interfere with “basal breaks,” – the most vigorous and productive new canes that renew your bush. The unproductive, older canes are usually hardened wood, or dead, and you will need loppers or a pruning saw. Also remove the canes that grow weak and spindly side-growth. According to Streeper, when pruning from the base of the bush (ground level, if your rose grows on its own roots), ideally, leave three to seven straight canes for the bush to renew itself. Remove canes that cross the center or crowd (rub against) others. Occasionally two strong canes may be successfully wedged apart with a short length of stem cut from the plant – a tip from Annie Owen. It's now time to decide how low to cut down the remaining

bush. That decision depends partly on the severity of last winter's damage, partly on the quality and size of blooms you want, partly on the growth habits of the variety, and partly on your personal preference. For instance, Don Gill prefers bushes to grow no taller than shoulder high; he does not want to climb a ladder to deadhead. Starting with last winter's damage, the rule is to prune until the inside shows "white pith," and that could be anywhere from three or four feet tall to inches above the crown. If large, long-stem blooms are your goal, you will want to prune more severely, say eighteen or twenty-four inches, leaving few or no lateral canes. Vigorous varieties, such as „Lynn Anderson, “ can be pruned lower than the less vigorous ones. Moderate pruning (above 24 inches) gives you larger bushes and more blooms, but smaller, with shorter stems. Very light pruning usually results in gangly foliage and less attractive blooms.

When you prune the remaining canes, look for “bud eyes” from which lateral canes will grow. They exist at the intersections (axils) where there were leaflets of five. Usually the bud eye at the top-most part of the cane is the first to grow. Try to leave an uppermost bud eye facing the direction you want a new cane or bloom to grow, usually away from the center. If several stems grow out of the same bud eye, pinch them off with you thumb and forefinger, leaving only the strongest. If you are wondering about whether to cut a cane or stem, follow Bob Martin's rule: “When in doubt, cut it out.”

After pruning, before you are finished, you can minimize problems with diseases and pests and maximize the health of your bushes in several ways. First, make sure no leaves from last year remain on the bush. Pull them off and discard them. Clean up all your debris left from pruning and all dried and dead leaves that have fallen

during the winter. Bag them up and throw them away, to get rid of insect eggs and fungi spores clinging to this material. Rake the bed clean and add a new layer of mulch. Spray your newly pruned bushes with a summer fungicide (not a dormant spray at this time), and when new leaves develop, start your disease prevention spray program.

What about climbers? Because of their unique growth pattern, main canes should rarely be cut back at all, except for removing dead wood. Rather, beginning in their first season, they should be trained into a horizontal position. In early spring, only the lateral stems and shoots growing from the main canes should be pruned, leaving two or three bud eyes (two to three inches). Alternatively, the laterals may be completely removed, forcing new laterals from dormant bud eyes on the main cane. Unproductive older canes (showing no vigorous growth from the last season) may be removed to the ground. Further pruning should be done only for shaping or thinning. Old garden roses and one-time bloomers should have only unproductive or dead wood removed in the spring, leaving most all of last year's vigorous growth, except as needed for shaping. These roses bloom on last year's wood; the more healthy growth that remains, the more blooms you will have. Repeat-blooming shrubs and David Austin roses may be pruned like hybrid teas, but more lightly or moderately, with less concern for the number of canes. The goal is to produce a healthy base to support this year's growth, which means thinning out weak and unproductive canes and shortening the remaining bush by about one third. As a rule, when pruning always remove dead, weak, and unproductive growth before the new season. If you leave it, it won't get better. It will worsen or die. **“When in doubt, cut it out.”**

Adapted from the March 2007 issue of the Nashville Rose Leaf, newsletter of the Nashville Rose Society, Sam Jones, Editor.