

Rose Pruning Basics

By Nanette Londeree | Marin Master Gardeners

There seems to be some mystery about pruning roses along with lots of "rules" to follow to do it correctly. If I've learned anything over the last decade, having pruned thousands of roses, it's that roses are very forgiving. If you cut too high, too low, at an inward facing bud rather than an outward facing one, in the long run, it really won't make a lot of difference. When the plant leafs out and it's not the shape or size you want, cut it again to correct it. Once you realize that there isn't too much you can do wrong, it makes the job less intimidating and a whole lot easier. Here are some general rose pruning tips to help you get started:

Time it right: Most types of roses get pruned when they are dormant; in our mild climate that is generally late December to mid-February. Don't prune old garden, once-blooming roses at that time. The flowers on old garden roses are produced right after they bloom so if you prune them in the winter, you'll be pruning your spring flowers away!

Dress for the occasion: Wear hard finish clothing like denim that is more resistant to punctures from thorns and cover your arms with long sleeves. Wear strong, durable, flexible gloves; the type with gauntlets that cover the forearm provide extra protection. And wear glasses to protect your eyes.

Use the right tools: Have your shears and loppers oiled, adjusted and very sharp! By-pass type shears and loppers are best as they make a clean cut without crushing or bruising canes. A small pruning saw, preferably with fine teeth, is highly desirable for cutting large canes and getting into places that can't be reached with shears or loppers.

Plan ahead before you cut: Decide how much of the plant you want to remove and the general shape / form you want to achieve. For most types of roses, you'd like to end up with a plant that has four to seven healthy canes in an open, vase-like form that promotes good interior air circulation. If in doubt about whether to remove a cane, leave it; you can remove it later in the season if needed. Once you get going, don't let the "decisions" about what to cut make you tense or slow you down.

Think about safety: Pay attention to where you're placing your hands. Roses don't stick you; you stick yourself on the roses! It's a good idea to confirm, before you start, that you've had a tetanus shot in the last 10 years.

MAKING THE CUTS:

- Start with the largest portions of the plant you want to take out – it makes the job go more quickly.
- Remove any dead, diseased, damaged, weak or twiggy growth, canes that are crossing, and dense interior growth. Also take out any suckers – those vigorous canes that emanate from below the bud union on grafted plants.
- Cut to an outside-facing bud on upright bushes and to an inside bud on sprawling-form bushes (growth will generate from the bud in the direction that it is pointing).
- Cut back to good healthy wood – look for white or cream-colored pith (interior of cane).
- Make the cut about 1/4" above the bud, at an angle so that it drains away from the bud.
- Remove at least one-third to one-half of the volume of the plant, a general rule of thumb is to cut the main canes back to "knee to waist-high" or 18 – 36 inches, depending on the type of rose.
- Older, non-productive canes should be removed right down to the bud union.
- Clean up when you're done: It is not necessary to seal cuts - there is no evidence to show that unsealed cuts are harmful to roses. Remove all leaves from the pruned plant and dispose of them along with stems and canes from the area - (don't compost them).



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