



Pruning Roses: The Kindest Cut

By Carol Seminara, HCMG

Valentine's Day, for me, is all about the roses. There's something about dozens of long-stemmed beauties with double-digit price tags that makes me want to snatch up a sharp blade and dash outside. Mid-February is when I like to prune my rose bushes and Feb. 14 is about as mid as February gets. More importantly, it's usually a time when our Hill Country roses are dormant.

Some gardeners are intimidated at the prospect of hacking away at their beloved plants. Not to worry. It is very difficult to kill a rose bush with bad pruning. You're probably not going to hurt it as long as you don't lop it off at ground level damaging the bud union (the usually swollen joint between the root stock and flowering canes of a grafted rose bush). An imperfect, good-faith pruning effort is actually much better for the plant than allowing it to grow willy-nilly.

Pruning generates several important benefits to your rose bush:

- It encourages new growth and promotes increased blooming.
- It removes dead wood that detracts from the plant's beauty and can attract insects.
- It improves air circulation around the plant and helps prevent fungal diseases.

Of course there are some tools and basic rules you'll need for the job ahead.

- By-pass shears, which have blades that cut like scissors, are used to remove canes up to 1/2-inch in diameter. Don't use anvil-type pruning shears because these crush stems as they cut and crushed stems are more susceptible to disease.
- Long-handled loppers are for cutting thicker branches larger than 1/2-inch diameter.
- A pruning saw may be necessary if you are removing whole, large canes.

All pruning tools must be sharp and clean. After each use and before working on the next plant, disinfect your shears by dipping the blades into isopropyl alcohol and wiping them off. This simple step will help prevent spreading diseases among your rose bushes. You will want to wear heavy, preferably leather gloves and a shirt with long sleeves as protection against thorns. Safety glasses or goggles are a good idea, too. It's better to look a little nerdy than poke out an eye.

Here are some how-to-do-it fundamentals:

Always prune back to a healthy bud that points toward the outside of the plant to direct new growth out from the center, opening up the bush. Cut the cane above the bud at a 45-degree angle going downward and away from the bud. Do not cut into the bud or so close that you damage it. Conversely, if you cut too far away from the bud leaving a stub, the cane can die back creating a possible entry point for insects or diseases. A little less than 1/4-inch above the bud is about the right distance for the top of the cut. All cuts should be clean, not ragged.

The surface of the newly cut cane should be white. If the exposed tissue is brown, cut the cane further back until healthy looking tissue is revealed. It is generally not necessary to coat small diameter cuts with a sealing compound. If, however, you have a problem with rose cane borers, then seal all pruning cuts for protection. White glue, such as Elmer's, is an effective and inexpensive sealant.

Begin pruning by removing all dead wood and any diseased or damaged branches. You want to keep green, healthy canes that are growing on new wood. If a new (i.e., green) cane is growing out of an old, deeply furrowed cane (also called a striated cane), then remove it.

On well-established plants, cut out any weak, spindly canes thinner than a pencil. If your rose bush is not vigorous and all you've got are thin, spindly canes, then obviously you should leave some.

Cut away any branches that cross through the center of the bush or that rub together. The shape you are trying to achieve is that of an upside-down umbrella or a vase, thus creating an open center to allow good air circulation and sunlight penetration.

Suckers are long, thin canes growing out of the base of the bush; these need to be removed by pulling them down and off the plant. Merely cutting off suckers only generates more suckers from any remaining undeveloped buds.

Your goal is to end up with four to six thick, sturdy, dark-green upright or outward pointing canes. Cut these remaining main stems back by one-half to one-third of the plant's height for a moderate pruning (suitable for most shrub roses).

Newly planted rose bushes and weak or neglected roses that need rejuvenation benefit from a hard pruning back to a height of 4 to 6 inches. Hard pruning helps build a vigorous root system and stimulates the plant to produce new, stronger canes. Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind.

If you're still not confident enough to take up the shears and show your roses some tough love, there is a virtual universe of info dedicated to the Queen of Flowers. Visit the [American Rose Society](#) and/or our pals at Texas A&M at