



How to prune your rose

Pruning uncut

Pruning is a way of fine tuning and controlling the growth of your rose plants. It helps to reduce diseases, keeping the plant shape attractive and also regulates blooming. Proper pruning encourages the rose to make vigorous new shoots that will support larger flowers. Since we all want our roses to be healthy and produce abundant flowers, pruning should be a job you love and face with confidence.

Pruning your roses is simple! Over my many years of rose growing, I have pruned tens of thousands of roses. I have also read countless articles on rose pruning and have come to the conclusion that some rose growers have too much time on their hands, and just want to complicate a very simple task. Below are my suggestions on how to prune roses. But remember, these are only suggestions. If you ask a 100 people how to prune a rose bush, you will get 101 different answers.

One good thing to remember is that you'll never kill a rose bush by pruning!

Well almost never.

4-D pruning guide

I consider this to be the safest and easiest method until you gather enough experience to develop your own way. With some fine-tuning, this method can be used for almost all types of roses from climbers to ground covers.

1. **Damaged:** Cut out any wood that has broken off during winter or has been rubbed by another stem. If open wounds are left, these canes tend to produce fewer flowers and are prone to galls and other diseases.
2. **Diseased:** If you notice canes with unusual growths or cankers, they should be cut down to healthy wood. Downy mildew (a rose disease) can leave purplish blotches on canes and these canes should also be cut down. There are exceptions. I've noticed a few varieties such as the beautiful 'Sally Holmes' that tends to have purple-blotched canes, and this is just a quirk of those variety.
3. **Decadent:** I had to look this word in the dictionary! According to Webster's, it means "decaying or deteriorating". If your bushes display this type of growth, cut this wood to the crown as it's unlikely to support flowers.

You'll notice older canes by their darkened colour and rough texture when compared with younger growth. It takes a bit of time to decide when these canes have outlived their productivity but removing them helps make way for the vigorous new basal breaks. Once your eye is trained you will spot the difference between ages of rose canes as easily as telling your friends apart! Climbers, shrubs and Old Garden Roses have canes that live much longer than hybrid teas or floribundas, so you should judge accordingly. Mini roses also can become tangled with this old wood, so they should be managed in the same way.



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4. **Dead:** Just to confuse you here, I will say that in *almost* all cases, you should cut dead wood to the crown. But, with many of the Old Garden Roses in my yard, I've found it to be very beneficial to leave the old dead wood under the plant to help support it. I've read about this in a few books, mostly from Old Rose enthusiasts who claim from experience that the old wood doesn't become diseased as with modern roses. It seems to act as a natural frame to support lax growth. My own collection of Old Garden roses consists of several healthy bushes having armloads of dead twiggy growth holding them up. When plants leaf out in the spring, they cover up much of this otherwise unsightly mess. This method suits me fine but might drive the tidy gardener over the edge! Do what you feel is best for your type of garden.

Choosing your tools

Buy the best pair of bypass pruners that you can afford. Let me repeat that. Buy the best pair of pruners that you can afford. A good pair of Felco pruners easily snips away crossing canes. Ten-dollar pruners will do the same job in skilled hands as my eighty-dollar Felco Pruners, but they won't last nearly as long. Most low-price pruners will dull within the first few cuts and will break or snap from metal fatigue before you head to your third rose bush. I use my pruners almost daily, for ten months of the year, so costly Felcos save me money in no time. If you have many bushes with larger canes, a pair of loppers or a small pruning saw is very useful. I've found the moderately priced pruning saw to be an excellent tool for larger jobs.

During pruning, it's important to keep your tools sharp and oiled. This helps them cut better and with less effort. If your hands don't have as much power as they used to, it might be worth it to purchase a set of "Anvil" style pruners. These are said to crush the canes but are very useful in many areas where rough cuts are suitable. They take far less power to cut and would be perfectly suited for shrub roses or Old Garden Roses. I also use them for topping some of the bushes in fall.

They tell us to disinfect our pruners with either rubbing alcohol or Lysol. I can't say for certain that I've never spread disease among the roses from pruning, but with great honesty, I don't dip my pruners unless I'm taking cuttings in the greenhouse or dealing with a plant I know to be seriously diseased.

Making the Cut

This is the most worrisome part of pruning, but it just needs a common sense approach. The amount you cut down each healthy rose cane depends on the way you like to garden, and the type of rose you have.

Sometimes shovel-pruning is the only solution after a harsh winter! In some years, we are forced to cut most of our modern roses down low because of winter damage. You can tell if a cane has been damaged in winter by the colour of the inside "pith". Make a clean cut and check to see if the colour is white or brownish. If you want your bushes to look tidy, try to make the cut just above a dormant or swelling bud. Some old canes on climbers and shrubs will have a slight brownish colour inside but will still produce a healthy rose. When dealing with Hybrid Teas and Floribundas, I've found that these brown canes usually die back further in the season, so it's best to cut them down to clean white wood early spring.



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If the winter has been mild, we're blessed with many choices come pruning time, and I generally cut my modern roses down by about half their original height. I'm told that constant hard pruning of roses will shorten their life, while pruning a rose too high each year gives you a nasty looking plant with few basal breaks to replace aging canes. Moderate common sense pruning has always worked well for me.

People can lead very convincing debates on how to best prune a rose. All methods have merit and we try to take the best from these methods. If you're still uncertain, remember one thing: you can kill a rose by many ways, but pruning is not one of them. Try to use common sense and look at the way the plant is growing and how you would like it to grow. If it's far too big, then cut it down to size. If the wood is sound and the plant is smaller, then let the foliage do its job and feed your rose. I try to ignore "theory" and do what makes the plant grow best. It's amazing what we can learn by simple observation and experimentation.

Never let anyone tell you that you've pruned your roses wrong! If they insist their way is better you can simply say with a smile "Oh, are people still doing it that old way?"

If all of this is just too complicated, grab your electric hedge clippers and cut the bush it half. Some recent studies showed that roses pruned in this way, actually did better than hand pruned roses!

Take that rose experts!

Pruning notes by class

Hybrid Teas

This popular group of superb cutting roses thrives on good culture, and a simple, tidy, moderate pruning in early spring. I find this the easiest group of roses to prune since they normally have very few canes. Make your cut just above a bud to avoid brown stubs. Cut them back about half of their original height, but always down to good clean wood. You can prune the average hybrid tea rose in less than 60 seconds! Well okay, for the first minute most of us fret, then it takes a minute to make the cuts, then we fret again for a minute again. Perhaps it's a three-minute job.

Floribundas

This group is pruned very much the same way as hybrid tea roses. Some of them tend to have thinner canes and denser growth than hybrid teas, while others are very similar looking when dormant. When shaping your plant it's acceptable to leave some of the thin and even crossing canes as long as they are not rubbing each other. Rubbing canes tend to cause wounds, so we try to trim one of those out. I prune mine down to about half of their original height. If you are spending more than three minutes to prune a typical floribunda you are fretting too much!

Miniatures and Patio Roses

Same pruning as floribundas, and if all else fails, cut them back half or even two-thirds and they will be happy campers! They have dormant buds very close together, so you don't even have to pay particular attention to where your cut is.



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Shrub and David Austin Roses

It's difficult to recommend pruning methods of such a diverse group of roses so just follow the basic 4D Rules and tidy them up! Shrubs will have many canes and it's a good idea to thin out some of the oldest ones. I find that most of my David Austin Roses look best when pruned about halfway, but some of my larger ones look nice when I trim of just the top third of the plant and allow them to arch or branch over. Pruning this group is all about how big or how small you want your plant to be.

Climbers and Ramblers

Everyone seems to freak out when it comes time to prune their climbers. In a nutshell, if it's too big prune it harder; if it's not big enough then prune less!

Ramblers were introduced before climbers and have more flexible canes. Most flower once in the summer on last year's wood. Since they flower on old wood, you don't want to prune them hard in spring. Tidy gardeners tend to prune the old growth out of ramblers after they flower, and train in the strong new shoots that will flower the next summer. Many of my Ramblers have masses of old wood left in them and they continue to flower in mass each summer, despite what I do or don't do to them!

Climbers flower all summer and tend to be what most gardeners plant. This type of rose can be pruned according to the gardener's needs. They tend to flower best when their longer canes are arched over, causing them to send up more lateral flowering shoots. These laterals can be pruned back harder to the main canes that are trained in place. Pruning in this fashion will encourage your climber to push out new growth each season. I also prune some of the climbing canes low or stagger-prune them to have flowers blooming at different heights rather than just on top.

Old Garden Roses

One of the most beautiful and elegant groups of roses. The majority of OGRs flower for a month in summer but do not repeat bloom. They are best pruned lightly, with some of the old growth thinned out and the tops trimmed back no more than one third. If you must prune your old roses harder, do this in the summer just after they flower, so they will produce new young canes that will flower the following summer. Many roses in this group make wonderful climbers if trained in this fashion. Leave plenty of last year's wood for them to flower on.

Ground Cover Roses

This indestructible group is often used in mass plantings but can also be used as single specimen plants in smaller gardens. They have this habit of growing much larger than expected here on the west coast and will benefit from a thinning haircut each season. You can just take the hedge sheers to these tough roses and then remove some of the old canes, or you can hand prune if you wish. Don't worry about looking for buds, they have them every quarter-inch and really don't care where you cut them. This is a group of roses that will flower well with little regard to how they are pruned. I tend to find them messy looking when dormant, so this is why I like to thin and haircut them! Do as you please, they don't mind.