

# Demystifying the Pruning Process

## What the Textbooks Don't Tell You

By Kitty Belendez

I can sympathize with the new rosarian. Pruning roses can seem like a mystery, especially if you have never done it before. I can still remember the first time that I attempted to prune a rose bush. I had bought a book about pruning, and for me it was a big process. I studied the book for hours before I would even go out into the yard and attempt the first cut. I was terrified that I would kill my three roses if I cut them the wrong way. Then I instructed my husband Bob where to make each cut and we hoped for the best. Of course, we did not kill those roses and they thrived in spite of our ignorance. But each year for several years we fretted that we would do something wrong.

Then we joined the Los Angeles Rose Society in 1987, and they held a public pruning demonstration at Descanso Gardens. That pruning demonstration made all the difference in the world. It's one thing to read about pruning in a book, but you have to actually get out there and see it being done to learn what pruning is all about.

We do hope that you will participate in a pruning demonstration offered by your local rose society. But for now, I would like to give you a few advance pointers to think about, to help alleviate your fears.

### **You Are Not Going to Kill Your Rose Bush!**

With the exception of lopping off your rose bush at ground level, there is practically nothing you can do that will kill your rose bush. Even if you do lop it off at ground level, and actually cut off the "hybrid" bud union, you would still have rootstock that would probably grow, although it would most likely be a "wild" red rose, i.e., Dr. Huey. If your rose is not grafted onto rootstock and is growing on its own roots, it would probably still send up some new canes.

### **What Does "Hard" Pruning Mean?**

Since my hybrid teas grow to heights of 5 or 6 feet, hard pruning for me would mean 2 feet tall. But my neighbor's roses are new bushes of different varieties than mine, so his only grow 4 feet tall. For him, hard pruning might mean one foot tall. The meaning of "hard" is only relative to what your situation is. I rarely hard prune my roses, and then only on a very selective basis, for a rose that needs a shock to get jump started and rejuvenated.

### **You Do Not Need to Prune Hard in Southern California**

But of course we DO NOT want you to lop off your roses at ground level. You don't even need to prune your roses hard as they sometimes instruct you to do in the rose books. If you lived in the very cold regions of the United States, such as Chicago, you would need to prune your bushes hard, but this is not necessary in Southern California.

### **You Do Not Need to Prune Down to the Best Three to Five Canes**

The rose pruning books would have you believe that every rose bush in your garden needs to be pruned to exactly 3 or 5 canes. That is nonsense. Of course, the new bareroot roses will probably have 3 to 5 canes, but established rose bushes will have many more canes than that, and it would be horribly sad to cut off all those bloom producing canes. I keep all the newest, greenest canes, and this could mean 12 or more depending on the variety and the age of the rose bush. Do get rid of all those very old, brown canes. You want to encourage new, green basal canes to grow.

## **All Roses Are Not Created Equal**

Hybrid teas, floribundas, shrubs, climbers, old garden roses, and miniatures are all different types of roses. They each need to be pruned differently. You cannot just lop them off at the same height. Each bush has its own unique personality and therefore needs to be pruned accordingly. Even roses of the same type need to be pruned individually. For example, you may have a hybrid tea that usually grows very tall and another one that grows very short. You would not prune both of these roses the same way, as one you would prune shorter and the other one you would prune taller.

## **You Don't Need to Spend Hours Agonizing Over Every Bush**

If you're spending more than 15 minutes on a large hybrid tea, you are spending too much time on it. A miniature should take no more than 5 minutes. For minis we simply use large, scissor-type hedge trimmers. A couple of large whacks does the trick, and then we do a little detail work on the individual canes. A climber or old garden rose could take a bit longer, simply because they are larger and may need to be selectively pruned and perhaps trained or pegged.

## **Do I Really Need to Remove All the Leaves on the Bush?**

No, you don't have to. Your rose bush will not die or suffer if you don't. If you have a lot of roses and are really pinched for time, you could skip this step.

However, removing all the foliage from a rose bush when it is being pruned serves many purposes that is good for your roses. First, stripping all the leaves and discarding them helps to control insects and diseases. It is the only time of the year when you can start anew. Also, removing the foliage will help your roses go temporarily dormant, which they need to start over. The third reason to remove the foliage is because a new cane will emerge at each point from which a set of leaflets is removed. Removing the foliage encourages the new canes to grow, and all the foliage you leave on will eventually die anyway.

## **Why Do I Have to Seal the Ends of the Canes After Pruning?**

Here again, you don't have to. I used to do it when I only had 50 rose bushes because I was told by more experienced rosarians that I had to do it. We would dab a little white Elmer's glue on the end of each pruned cane to help prevent cane borer damage. These borers drill into the ends of the freshly cut canes and lay their eggs, and sometimes the cane will die back. With 350 rose bushes now, we do not do this anymore since it is a tremendous amount of work and is very time-consuming. I occasionally see some cane borer damage, but it is so minimal that it is not worth the time it takes to seal the ends of the canes of all my roses.

## **Do I Really Need to Prune My Roses?**

If you really want to grow good roses, yes, you need to. But don't make it into a bigger and more complicated project than it really is.

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