

PINCH PRUNING

By Ludwig Taschner

By mid September the roses are covered with the new glossy shoots that are in the process of forming the flowering buds. The reddish purplish leaves will slowly mature to green. This is the time for **PINCH PRUNING or finger pruning**. This is an age-old nursery practice. When the new shoot is sprouting from the budded eye and has developed five to seven leaves the tip is pinched out in order for this soft stem to harden more quickly (to prevent wind breakage) or to force out new basal side stems. Since the roses are never all at the same stage of development I suggest going through the roses twice, doing the late flowering varieties such as 'Esther Geldenhuys' and 'Yankee Doodle' a week later.

Every bush should be assessed on its own and about a third of the stems are pinch pruned. This means that out of 15 stems, the tips of five are pinched out by using the thumb and pointing finger. To make matters more complicated there are two methods of pinching and both may be carried out on one bush.

The **SOFT PINCH** entails removing just the tip of a new shoot that is not yet showing any sign of flower bud formation. The result will be the same in that the red purplish leaves will mature to green within a week but only the very upper eye will re-sprout. One can expect an extended or double stem flower where the pinching occurred and this is hardly noticed when picking the flower. With the soft pinch one delays flowering by about two weeks.

The **HARD PINCH** entails pinching out the terminal of a soft shoot with two to four leaves. The remaining purplish leaves will turn green within a few days and the root system is fed from them. New shoots develop in the upper two or three leaf axels. They will flower three weeks after the first bloom from an "unpinched" stem has shown colour. Hard pinching, more then soft pinching results in longer stems and larger blooms than found on those shoots that were not pinched.

The advantages of pinch pruning are numerous.

- Green leaves are forced on a rose bush at an early stage. These assimilate and produce carbohydrates, sugars and auxines that are sent down to feed the roots. This positive sign encourages the roots to become hyper active and with the formation of new hair roots more water and nutrients are absorbed and pushed upwards.
- A natural and steady maturing of the leaves is only desirable if the rose is expected to set seed after the first flush and retain all the leaves it has produced. This also results in root activity slowing down as the only requirement for the leaves is not to dry out and for seed development to be maintained. For modern quick repeating and continuous flowering roses this is not desirable. By pinching we are maintaining a high root activity.

- The pinching spreads out the flowering cycle and, to a degree, this is maintained for the rest of the season depending on the subsequent picking of blooms and cutting off of dead flowers.
- A very important aspect is that the rose bush is not robbed of the majority of its active leaves by cutting too many long stemmed blooms. The new shoots on the pinched stems ensure balanced root activity even when the first, long awaited, flowers are picked for the home.
- New basal stems are expected sooner than is the case on plants that have not been pinched.

Climbers, shrub and groundcover roses and even miniatures as well as the larger cluster flowering floribundas do not require pinch pruning for a better performance. The leaf mass on these roses is so much more and there is little likelihood that too many long stemmed blooms will be picked, so the effort in pinching such large plants is in no relation to the rewards.