

Pruning Miniature Roses

By Robert B. Martin, Jr.

Let us consider the subject of pruning miniature roses. In short, you prune a miniature rose just like its counterpart, the hybrid tea. But there is a little more to it than that. So here are some additional thoughts on the subject.

At the outset, I want to emphasize that most of what follows is applicable to an established miniature rose, whether in the ground or a good-sized container. By an established rose, I mean a miniature that is at least a year old. Most of my established miniatures are in the ground; but a few are in seven-gallon squat pots, which I had used extensively when gardening in Pasadena. As there, my newer minis are in one gallon containers and I will address their treatment separately below.

In addition, my advice pertains generally to miniatures that are in essence a small version of the hybrid tea. There are other forms of miniature roses, such as miniature climbers and polyanthas masquerading as miniatures. These are also discussed separately below.

Miniatures Roses Are Different

The first step in understanding how to prune a miniature rose is to appreciate how a miniature rose differs from a hybrid tea. It is, of course, much smaller in size, but that is not the only difference. Unlike most hybrid teas, which are typically grafted plants; miniature roses are nearly always growing on their own roots. As a consequence they typically have many more canes than a corresponding hybrid tea and, depending on their age, those canes tend to vary more in their diameter. They also tend to exhibit more "twiggy" growth than a hybrid tea, especially when they are young. It is also of note that the typical miniature rose has much tighter internodal spacing on the canes than a hybrid tea. This means that the spacing between the buds is generally small and this feature affords more flexibility in choosing where to cut to a promising bud eye than does the typical hybrid tea. This also explains why the impatient gardener can simply prune miniature roses with hedge shears with fairly good effect and minimal die-back. I will reserve further comment on this technique to the conclusion of this article.

The Ergonomics of Pruning

The small size of the miniature rose presents practical problems in pruning that can be discouraging to a new rosarian, particularly since the number of canes requires more cuts than pruning a hybrid tea. Bending over to prune miniatures, or squatting for extended periods of time, can be very hard on the body. So the first step in pruning a miniature rose is to find a comfortable way to do so.

My own approach varies depending on whether the miniature rose is in the ground or in a container. In both cases I sit while pruning minis. For those in the ground I use one of those small benches on wheels that are advertised in many gardening catalogues. The height of the bench is such that I can see the miniature rose at eye level and the wheels permit me to scoot along as I work. For miniatures in containers I use a plastic garden chair. I place the container on an elevated surface so that it is again at eye level.

Tools

The main tool for pruning is of course a good pair of pruning shears. Some rosarians prefer small shears for use with miniatures, particularly those with longer narrow blades that fit easier between the tighter branches of the miniature rose. For many years I used the Shear Magic No. 562 Slimmer Trimmer that has Teflon coated high carbon steel blades, a vinyl coated handle, and a rubber strap the purpose of which is unknown. These used to be more widely available in garden stores but are still available in the A.M. Leonard catalogue for about \$24. They are really quite handy but the truth is that in recent years I have pretty much drifted into using my standard #8 Felco pruning shears for the project. I still keep a pair of the Slimmer Trimmers in my grooming kit since their compact size allows for precise use in exhibiting.

The other useful tool is a small rake. A small wooden rake is useful for cleaning around the miniature roses in the ground, and a small hand rake is helpful in containers. Some years ago, after complaining that I was still looking for a better hand rake, a friend gave me two wooden back scratchers that she had found in a Chinese souvenir shop. These work very well for containers. I also imagine that something designed for a child's sand box might serve the purpose as well.

Planning Your Pruning

Most rose growers start the pruning process from the top of the bush, clipping away as if they were barbers giving their roses a trim. It is better and more efficient to start the process by looking at the rose at the ground level. There you will observe the strongest canes as well as a fair amount of twiggy growth. Picture in your mind what the rose will look like when you are finished. Ideally there will be a number of strong canes about the thickness of your little finger, all emerging from the ground. The twiggy and branched growth will be gone; as will be the foliage. With this picture in your mind you can turn your attention to turning your vision into a reality.

The Mechanics of Pruning

Begin the pruning process by removing all brown dead growth from the bottom and continue by removing all the twiggy growth. This includes small stems that have a diameter less than the size of your little finger. This will allow you to view the number of canes that remain. There is no limit to the number of canes to retain and I remove canes only when they are clearly spent or are growing sideways or in directions which interfere with other growth. I figure the bush knows better than I how many canes it can support.

Having removed what I intend to remove, the next step is to reduce the size of the canes. Follow the cane up with your eyes until you reach the point where it branches. Ignore small, insignificant branches which should simply be removed. Then mentally divide the length of the cane from the ground to the point of branching into three. The objective is to remove the top one-third. If you are lucky you will find an outwardly facing bud eye at exactly this point, in which case cut the cane just above the bud eye. More likely the nearest bud eye will be above or below this point. I generally trim to a lower bud eye but if the remaining cane looks like it will be shorter than its neighbors, then I prune to the higher one. Do not imagine that it makes much difference because it does not. Also there is very little magic to the angle of the cut so do not be concerned about it.

The next step is to remove the foliage from the canes that remain. Why do we remove the foliage in Arizona? We do so because most of the foliage is going to fall off anyway and its easier to pull it off now than to go back to rake it up. It also tends to encourage what little sense of dormancy our plants get in our winter-less climate. I also believe it helps in disease control. In any event it is easier to remove the foliage as the last step since your pruning will have already removed most of the foliage you started with.

Cleaning Up

The final step in the pruning process is to clean up the bed. This is the time to remove any weeds in the vicinity and to carefully pull the oxalis out of your containers. (Where in space this stuff comes from is a mystery to me but it always seems to make its way into containers.) If the miniature is in the ground, rake up under the rose to remove all debris. You can also rake up a rose in a container if you can find a suitable hand rake. I usually take the whole container and turning it sideways dump the leaves and debris into the trash.

The clippings and debris of pruning miniature roses should, as is the case of all roses, be put in trash bags and tossed out. Do not attempt to add this material to your compost heap as rose canes decompose slowly and the fungus spores, over wintering eggs, and other things there survive the composting process quite well.

Root Pruning

A miniature rose that has been in a container for two or three years will often become root-bound. You can sense this by looking at the size of the rose relative to the container. There is normally as much in the way of roots as there is growing at the top. Also since the water in containers runs mostly down the sides, the roots head out to the sides of the container and then start to circle. If you are uncertain, lift the rose from the container and examine the roots. If there are an excessive number of circling roots at the side the rose will benefit from root pruning. Take a sharp knife or a pair of grass shears and trim the circling roots off. While you are at it; trim about a half-inch off the bottom. Then replenish the soil in your container to make up for what you have removed. You will find that this revitalizes a miniature rose for several more years at which time it can be done again.

Hedge Shears as an Alternative

I know several fine rosarians who regard the method I describe above as too much work and who therefore prefer to prune their miniature roses with hedge shears. This is not really a bad idea since the close spacing between the buds of miniatures is such that there is little concern of dieback. It is in fact the way I prune my polyanthas and my shrubby miniature roses, such as Gourmet Popcorn, that are actually polyanthas in disguise. But in the case of the miniatures that are like small hybrid teas, I am not convinced that this method saves much time and that the small amount of time saved is worth it. This is because even after trimming with hedge shears, you have to remove the trimmings and then go into the plant with your pruning shears to removed dead growth, twiggy growth and clean up the often ragged cuts left by the shears. And if you then take the time to clean up the plant well and get its shape to an optimum, I doubt that you have saved any time as well. But pruning with hedge shears can be done, and it can even be done sloppily. Miniature roses are very forgiving of their treatment at pruning time and even a bad pruning is better than none at all.

Climbing Miniatures

Climbing miniatures are approached somewhat differently than the bush form; although less so than large climbers. Large climbers generally bloom on second year wood; this is not the case with miniatures. A climbing miniature is really just a miniature rose with very long canes. Like other climbers, though, most of the blooming comes on laterals growing off the canes. So the plan with climbing miniatures is not to shorten the canes that are left behind but instead to espalier them out to the horizontal by tying them to a support. Again dead and twiggy growth should be removed, as well as spent laterals from the previous years blooms.

Maiden Miniatures

As I indicated at the beginning most of what I have said above applies to an established miniature rose bush. I consider a miniature rose that is under one year old to be a maiden. You should have promptly removed it from its small pot when received and have repotted it in a one gallon pot. After a year or so of growth it may be ready to be moved to a larger pot or the ground. But as for pruning, all I usually do with maiden miniatures is to snip off the spent blooms and remove the occasional small twiggly growth from the bottom of the bush.

Conclusion

Having now written all of the above, I see that there is more to pruning miniature roses than to know that you prune them just like a hybrid. But then it's not really a lot more. In any event it is well to keep in mind the fact, as I have said, that miniature roses are very forgiving of the pruning process. It is actually pretty hard to make a mess of the project so the best thing to do is to just get at it and learn as you go. With a little classical or country music on the radio it can actually make for a pleasant afternoon.