

Pruning Roses

By Jason Miller

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'Sheila's Perfume'
(a Hybrid Tea rose)

Photo by Jason Miller

A rose by any other name still needs pruning A few cuts now will help ensure colorful, healthy roses this summer

You can call your roses by any name you want, and they'll still smell as sweet. But when it comes time to prune them, a few quick pointers will help you keep them growing disease-free and beautiful.

First, prune them when you're supposed to. The preferred time to prune roses is in late winter or early spring just as buds are beginning to swell. In Skagit County, this translates to mid-February to early March, when it's easy to distinguish the dead wood from the living, and to see new buds forming, showing you how the plant intends to grow. So grab your pruners and a bottle of Listerine, Lysol or Pine-Sol (you'll need this to clean your pruners between each cut), and let's get started.

Step One: Open up the interior

Prune back all dead canes to the crown, that slightly swollen portion of the rose plant that should be just above the ground, and from which the canes grow. Look for crossed canes, suckers (canes that aren't growing from the crown); and weak, spindly growth (less than a pencil width)—and cut them all off. Now remove the two oldest canes down to ground level—regardless of their health status. This will open the center of the shrub and allow for better air circulation. And that helps to prevent many common rose diseases.



Increase air circulation through your rose plants by pruning back all dead canes, crossed canes, suckers, and weak, spindly growth.

Photo by Jason Miller.

Step Two: Get rid of the hopeless cases

Damaged, dead or diseased wood is at best more clutter and at worst, just asking for trouble during the coming growing season. Prune dead and diseased wood to the ground. For canes that are only partially dead, remove the dead portions by moving down to the live portions of the canes and making cuts about ¼ inch above outward-facing buds, cutting at the same angle as the bud.



Make your pruning cuts about ¼ inch above outward-facing buds, cutting at the same angle as the bud. Photo by Jason Miller

Step Three: Give your rose some shape

Thinking “overall appearance,” trim back one third of the tallest canes, removing no more than one-quarter of each cane. You want the plant to look like a bush, not a spindly giant.

Step Four: Clean and seal

Use wood glue to seal all cuts on canes larger than a pencil width. This helps to prevent cane borers and other nasty insects from entering the canes and causing trouble. Dispose of all the canes and foliage you trimmed off by burning them or putting them in the trash. This helps to stop the spread of disease.

What’s the best pruning strategy?

Well, that depends on you and what variety of rose(s) gracing your garden. Heavy (aggressive) pruning is the choice of gardeners looking for fewer but larger roses, while light pruning allows a bush to grow to its natural size and shape and produce more, but smaller, flowers. Here’s a quick rundown of pruning strategy, by rose type:

Hybrid Perpetual and Hybrid Tea roses

These flower on the current season’s growth and are usually hard pruned. Remove all but three to six well-spaced canes, and cut these back 6 to 12 inches from the ground.



‘Fragrant Cloud’ (a Hybrid Tea rose)
Photo by Jason Miller

Grandiflora roses

These are pruned in the same fashion as Hybrid Perpetuals and Hybrid Teas, but they can support as many as eight structural canes.

Floribunda roses

Keep six to eight canes; prune back year-old shoots by one-third, any older shoots to nine inches, and laterals to six inches.

Miniature roses

These are pruned the same as larger Hybrid Tea roses, but canes are cut back four to six inches from ground.

Polyantha roses

Strong canes are cut back by half the first year and one-third or less in following years.

Shrub roses

Prune these to shape only when young. When mature, some old canes may be removed, along with diseased or twiggy growth.

Old Garden Roses

These may be pruned by removing the oldest canes and shortening the other canes by about a third. On true ramblers, flowering occurs on two-year old canes, which only bloom once. All the old canes should be cut off following blooming and when new canes are growing.

Climbing roses

Some climbers bloom once; others rebloom. The flowers form on lateral canes that grow out of the primary canes. Shorten these lateral canes to three to six inches. Remove flower heads on reblooming varieties to encourage a second bloom.

Tree roses

Prune these as you would Hybrid Teas or Floribundas. Always remove any growth from the trunk and check that the support stake is not rubbing the plant.

This may sound like a lot of work and, in truth, it can be—especially if you plan to have a sizable rose garden. But the rewards of spending time with your roses before the world awakens to spring will pay off with healthier plants that bloom and rebloom, filling your garden with color and fragrance. And that's not a bad trade.