



There is nothing like a full load of thorny rose canes to end a day.  
CAROL BARANY PHOTO

# Don't Be Too Hesitant to Prune

Roses are tougher than you may think.

by Carol Barany for Yakima Valley Master Gardeners

**W**I left the Master Gardener greenhouses on March 5 and announced that I was going home to prune my roses, at least one fellow rose grower was concerned that it was way too early.

Gardeners do fret about the timing of this annual ritual. I looked at a column I wrote about rose pruning in 2015. That year, by this time, the job was done. Old wisdom advises that it's time to prune when the forsythia blooms. In 2015, it was blooming in late February.

I know many gardeners are concerned with the potential for late frost damage, so they're sitting on their pruners for now. My roses are planted in a sea of perennials and bulbs, and their tender shoots are also emerging. If I waited another week or two to prune, I'd flatten all that fresh growth as I moved through the roses.

Experienced rosarians don't need my advice on pruning. Newcomers may need more encouragement. Be assured that roses will dependably send fresh

shoots out of old canes, even if you cut them nearly to the ground.

Venturing out into that tangle of brambles can be daunting, so make the easy cuts first. Remove all dead wood at the graft union, leaving no stubs.

Next, tackle the old canes, which don't produce many flowers. Young canes are often red or a shade of healthy green and about the diameter of your thumb. Older wood looks darker or mottled. When in doubt, examine the pith, which is the soft wood that fills the stem. When young and healthy, it's creamy white or green. Brown or blackened pith is either old or already dead.

Generally, canes 1½ inches or larger in diameter won't produce many roses, so remove them. Remove twiggy canes that are less than the diameter of a pencil where they meet the graft union, unless the rose is a Miniature or small Floribunda, whose canes remain slender. Remove branches that cross, rub, or grow in the wrong direction.

If the rose is grafted and there is sucker growth, remove it by digging down to where the sucker comes off the root and twist and tear it off with your hands. Cutting stimulates the re-growth of several suckers where there once was one.

Deciding how much more wood you want to remove is as much art as science. Aim for a fountain-shaped bush, with canes radiating from the bud union arching upward and outward around an open center. For most Tea, Floribunda, Grandiflora, and English roses, pick five to eight strong, healthy canes, anywhere from 18 to 30 inches tall (about one half their former height). Keep in mind that there's no hard and fast rule. Consider your garden space and personal preference.

Modern shrub roses, which naturally have more branches, are pruned a bit differently. In their first two or three seasons, leave them unpruned, but deadheaded. Then try what the University of Illinois Extension calls the "one-third" method. In the spring,

remove one-third of the very oldest canes. Keep about one-third of the very youngest canes that grew the previous season, and remove the remaining canes. Remember that shrub roses were bred to grow vigorously, so prune them two feet shorter than the height you want them to be this season.

Train the canes of climbing roses to grow horizontally. This encourages more laterals or side-shoots to form, which is where the flowers originate. In the fall, prune the laterals to three to six inches and remove one or two of the oldest canes at the ground.

The process of pruning triggers a rose's growth cycle. Once again, it's all about apical dominance. At each break on the cane where a leaf grew, there's a bud eye which remains inactive as long as there's a growth point above it. Once that top growth is pruned away, the bud eye that you made the highest point on the cane will be the one that starts growing. Try to prune to an outward facing bud, since the direction the bud faces is the direction the new shoot will grow. Cuts like these divert new growth away from the center of the plant out to where it gets more sun, yielding more flowers. Cut about one quarter inch above the bud at a 45-degree angle, slanting the cut upward and away from the bud.

If cane borers are a problem, seal the cuts with Elmer's Glue to prevent the critters from entering.

Tidy up by removing all weeds and last year's rose leaves and flower petals.

I got the job done, just as I said I would. Was every cut I made perfectly placed and precise? Heck no. I did the best I could in the time I had. My arms and shins weren't shredded too badly by thorns, and I only lost one pair of pruners. I got a mountain of old canes picked up and loaded into my Suburban for recycling at the county yard waste site.

It was a good day.

