

# Getting Your Roses Ready for Spring

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## When to Prune

It's after Washington's Birthday and you're thinking about working in your rose garden. You've sharpened your cutting tools and all the nicely cleaned and oiled tools put away last fall are ready to be used again. You've removed any winter protection materials from around the rose bushes, and you're ready to tackle the spring pruning. As you examine the rose bushes, you notice many canes sprouting new growth and healthy leaves. However, the winds in the gorge and the hills around Vancouver create many microclimates in our area. Thus, it is recommended that you wait until after the last hard freeze before you begin to prune. So there is no one date to prune roses. You can wait as late as St. Patrick's Day. It takes about 90 days from the day you prune the bush to the day the bush blooms. Early pruning generally brings earlier blooms, but the probability of a hard freeze goes along with that.

## Tools & Method

Your pruning shears must be sharp as the cut must be clean, not crushed, with no ragged edges. Select a growth eye (new growth bud) on the cane facing out from the plant. Cut the cane diagonally about one-fourth inch above the eye with the slant towards the center of the bush. Check the center of the cane after you cut it – it should be the color of the inside of an apple. If the center of the cane is still brown, continue to cut off more until the cane is healthy or nearly white in color. Sometimes, after a very cold winter, you'll have to cut some canes down to the graft (or bud union – the central portion of the bush usually just above the ground).

Check the graft for a hard mushroom-like or corky looking growth (crown gall). This is the result of a bacterial disease and should be removed. Cut the growth out and sterilize the exposed surface (and your tools) with a diluted Lysol mixture (don't use bleach as it can pit your pruners).

## Pruning the Rose Bush

Roses can and do grow without pruning, but careful pruning is an important part of growing a healthy rose bush.

Look at the bush and consider your end goal. After pruning, the bush should have a vase or urn-shape with just a few canes, all leaning out from the graft. The first step is to remove canes and the second step is to prune the remaining canes. Remove all dead canes. Remove all badly damaged canes. Remove any spindly or weak canes down to the graft, and remove the canes which cross over and interfere with the vase shape you planned. Now, consider the healthy canes which are still standing.

How tall should the healthy canes be? Just as there is no standard date to prune a rose, there is no standard length for a rose cane. A *light* pruning means that only the very tops of the bush are cut off. *Hard* pruning means that only short canes remain or that you had to prune down to the graft. But there is a middle of the road. Several factors help determine how high the cane should be. A new branch (called a shoot) will grow from just below where you cut the cane, but the new shoot will be smaller in diameter than the cane from which it sprouted. The shorter the

cane is cut, the larger the new growth diameter will be, and the larger the blooms the shoot can support. If the canes of Hybrid Teas are cut short, there is a tendency to have fewer but larger blooms. If you want a bush covered with blooms, leave the canes longer.

You can prune Floribundas a bit higher and at varying lengths to permit more blooms on the bush. Miniatures respond to pruning similar to either the floribundas or hybrid teas. Standard or tree roses should be pruned back to 3 to 6 buds (or bud eyes) on a cane, or 6 to 8 inches from the bud union. When it comes to shrubs and Old Garden Roses, you need to know the growth habit of your rose before you prune, as some will flower only on old or last year's wood. The same is true of once-blooming climbing roses. If you've been pruning your climbers and have never had much bloom, this may be the explanation. It's best to prune once blooming roses in the late summer after they have finished blooming. In the spring, prune to remove dead, diseased, or weak canes and to lightly shape the bush.

Clean up the bed around the bushes so that there are no old leaves or debris which can harbor diseases such as mildew or insects such as the cane borer or aphids.

## **Planting New Bushes**

If you purchased new rose bushes either as bare root or in pots, remove the plant from the pot, check that the roots are healthy (cut off any damaged roots), and soak the bush in water overnight or until you get around to planting the bush. You can add a Vitamin B<sub>1</sub> complex solution to the water to stimulate root growth.

When you select a location for the new bush, dig a hole about 18 to 24 inches deep and 18 inches across. As you dig, put the soil on a tarp or in a wheelbarrow. Add about half the volume of the hole in compost or aged manure to the soil; also add a couple of cups of alfalfa (either meal or pellets), some superphosphate (0-18-0), and some gypsum if the soil is too acid. Mix all this well. Place the bush so that the bud union is about one finger thickness above the level of the soil and fill the hole loosely with the amended soil. Water the area well. Once the soil has settled, fill the hole the rest of the way and water again. Re-prune the bush if necessary, and spray to reduce disease.

Spray the trimmed bushes with an insecticide of your choice and a fungicide, unless you prefer non-chemical treatment of the rose bed. After this initial treatment, spray the insecticide only when harmful insects are present. Use the fungicidal spray as a preventative on a 7- to 10- to 14-day cycle throughout the growing season. Many rose growers use a couple of different fungicides on an alternating basis.

Now relax and wait for the leaf growth, but check routinely for aphids, mildew, or dieback. And begin your cycle of spraying to prevent disease or insect damage.

## **Hands-on Lessons**

If you want a hands-on lesson in Spring Pruning, join the Fort Vancouver Rose Society at the Esther Short Park rose garden on a Saturday in March (check the Coming Events for the next session). We'll be giving the roses their spring pruning as well as cleaning the rose bed and feeding the roses. Bring your pruners and pitch in – more hands make for quick work. When we finish with the Esther Short Park garden, we move on to the Covington House rose garden.

Both gardens have a variety of kinds of roses: hybrid teas, floribundas, climbers, shrubs, but no miniatures. However, if you have questions about caring for your miniature roses, the FVRS members can help you there as well.