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Pruning:

The Why, the What, and the How To of Pruning

The Why

Winter has given your roses a chance to go dormant and be nonproductive. Roses need this break from growing. If you have winterized adequately and the winter hasn't been too harsh, your plant is now ready to come back to life. Pruning is the process by that signals the plant to start the rejuvenation process by removing old and damaged wood while promoting healing and new growth. If done properly and with a plan, pruning can encourage new basal growth -- the emergence of new canes from the bud union.

You want to prune you rose plant to eliminate weak canes that can sap energy from the rest of the plant. Pruning lets you shape the plant in order to get the growth habit you desire -- a habit that will encourage a balanced plant with tall, healthy canes.

Pruning is also the way in which you can "open up" the middle of the plant for good airflow. Why is this important? Good airflow minimizes your risk of fungal disease -- blackspot, mildew, etc. -- and makes care much easier. Clearing the middle also provides room for new growth that will sustain the plant throughout the growing season.

The What

- What do you need in order to prune your roses easily and effectively? It's really quite simple.
- A quality pair of pruning shears
- Loppers (long-handled pruning shears designed for thick canes and branches)
- Small wire brush
- Leather or puncture-proof gloves



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A good pair of pruning shears makes all the difference in the world. This is one area where you don't want to cut corners. Clean and smooth cuts help ensure the health of the rose. The blade should be sharp because you want to cut the cane, not crush it.

Don't try to "muscle" a thick cane with pruning shears. A good pair of loppers makes the job easy and does not damage the plant. If you try to cut heavy wood with pruning shears you can permanently damage both the plant and the shears. Plus, you have to work too hard if you do not have the right tool.

Why a wire brush? To brush away old dead bark from around the bud union. By doing this in the spring, you are helping to encourage basal breaks and new growth by making it easy for the rose to send out those new shoots.

Good gloves are a must! The last thing you want to do is stick yourself with those pesky prickles. Not only are they annoying, but they can lead to infections and illness. Take one extra precaution and make certain you are current on your tetanus shot. You want to remain healthy so you can enjoy the fruits of your labor.

The How To

Rule #1 - Don't be afraid to cut!!

If the stem isn't at least larger than a pencil, then get rid of it! A cane is not going to produce a stem larger than itself. Cut out all the spindly and weak growth. This will encourage the rose to produce new growth on strong healthy canes.

Rule #2 - Cut to the white wood!

When you prune, you want the center of the cane to show white, healthy wood. You want green bark and a white center. If you don't get that in your first cut, cut some more and keep cutting until you get a white core. The stem may be green on the outside but if the core is not a white pith, then you will be wasting your time. That cane will cause you more headache than it is worth. Remember it is OK to cut back to the bud union.

Rule #3 - Make the proper cut



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This is really quite simple. Find a dormant bud eye (slightly swollen spot where a leaf cluster is or was connected) on a strong cane. Choose a bud eye that faces away from the center of the plant. Make a 45-degree angle cut about 1/4 - 1/2 inch above the eye. The cut should angle down and away from the eye. When you are finished cutting to good wood, put a drop of Elmer's glue on the cut to seal it. This will help protect from insects that might enjoy boring into that fresh wood.

Cut to an outside eye to keep from having all your canes growing together in the middle of the rose bush. You want the center of the plant to be open to promote good air circulation and new growth. An easy way to remember is to clear out the center so you could rest a mixing bowl in the middle.

Cut an angle away from the bud eye because the natural sap of the plant will rise to seal the cut and by cutting away from the eye, the sap will not interfere with the natural growth of the eye. See, there is really nothing mystical about it at all.

Rule #4 - Expect the unexpected

Expect Mother Nature to keep us on our toes. We all know how temperatures can change in a moment's notice. So be prepared.

The mulch you pulled away from the plant, so that you could prune, should be kept near the plant. Watch the weather, and, if cold weather or frost is expected, go back out and lightly cover any new and tender growth. If the forecast is for several days of subfreezing weather, then mound the mulch around the plant to keep it from freezing. When warm days return, simply pull the mulch back and let the plant enjoy the warmth of the sun.

One last reminder - your plants want water. A typical spring will provide the rain necessary, but don't take that for granted. Don't let the soil get dry. Invest in a rain gauge to see if your roses are getting the inch of rain they need a week.

This may sound like a lot to do, but it really doesn't take much time - especially if you have a small and easy-to-manage garden. You will be rewarded handsomely for the time you spend now doing it the right way! Remember the basics and be sure to have fun!

This was obtained from part of an article titled "Pruning--A Good Wake-Up Call" written by Logan Shillinglaw in the Beginners' Column of the American Rose publication -- March of 2001 issue.