

Pruning Roses and Getting Ready for Spring

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For most rose growers, late winter and early spring are the busiest, most labor intensive time of year. This is the time to clean-up after last year's growing season and make things ready for a new season. Implementation of good husbandry practices now leads to a much easier time achieving outstanding results during the rest of the growing season.

Clean-Up. Rose beds need to be clear of all foreign material. Last year's leaves...both from the roses themselves and other plants in your yard...are prime growing medium for fungal organisms that can turn into mildew problems when the weather starts to warm up. Rain and sprinklers can exacerbate this problem...the water hits the ground covered with organic material and the fungus bounces on to plant surfaces. After that occurs, any stress or optimal weather condition causes the fungus to excrete the mycotoxin that blooms into one of our mildew problems. Leftover leaves and branches are also good places for pests to hide and preserve themselves from winter weather so they are ready to attack when things warm up.

Rake up all this debris and either compost or dispose of it. The ground beneath and around your roses should be clear of all old organic material. All you want there is clean soil.

This process takes a couple of passes for me over the course of the winter...first when raking all those tree leaves that have fallen into the flower beds. Then again when you're pruning your roses. All the leaves that have fallen from your roses, and those you remove during the pruning process, all need to go.

Pruning. Pruning roses in the spring is your best opportunity to direct the new growth of your plant for the coming season and hopefully rectify any problems in growth habit from the previous season.

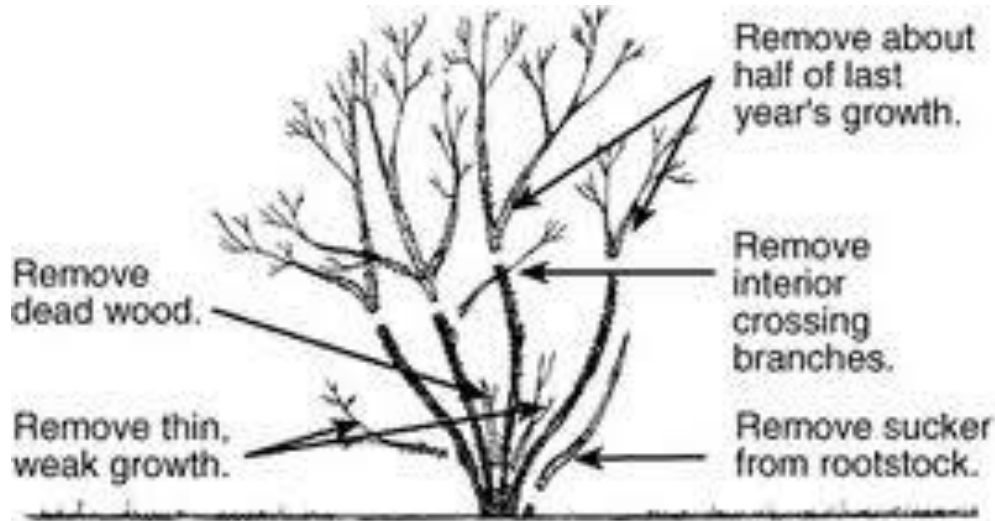
In most years, our mild climate has many folks asking if it's really necessary to prune and remove leaves. Many roses here in the San Joaquin Valley don't even drop all their leaves unless we have an unusually hard freeze...something we haven't had in years.

Ideally, we should prune roses before or just as we see bud eyes bulging on the canes. Depending on the goals of the Rosarian, this timeframe can change a little...especially in our climate. Those who show roses will frequently have a completely different strategy for pruning than those who grow roses purely for landscaping purposes. If you show roses, you may want to plan your pruning schedule to try and hit peak bloom in the timeframe for most of your shows...a difficult guessing game at best. For most of us growing roses for the beauty of them, we should get started pruning and try to have it all done by the end of February in our area.

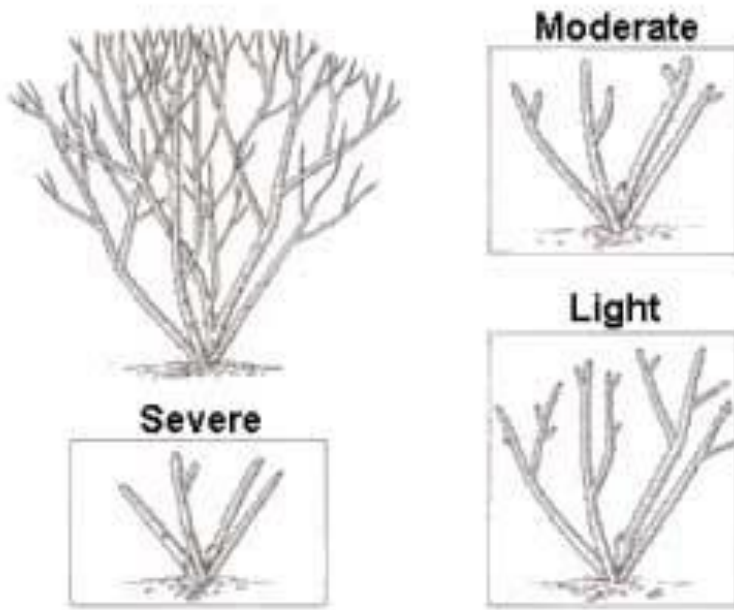
The primary goal of pruning is to get old, spindly or unhealthy growth off the plant and shape the plant for the new season. If the leaves haven't dropped on their own, try to remove every leaf by hand. This is tedious work...especially on climbers and miniatures/minifloras. The reason we take the leaves off is

two-fold. #1 the plant needs a little rest and #2 by getting that old leaf out of the way the bud eye has nothing inhibiting it from pushing out new growth.

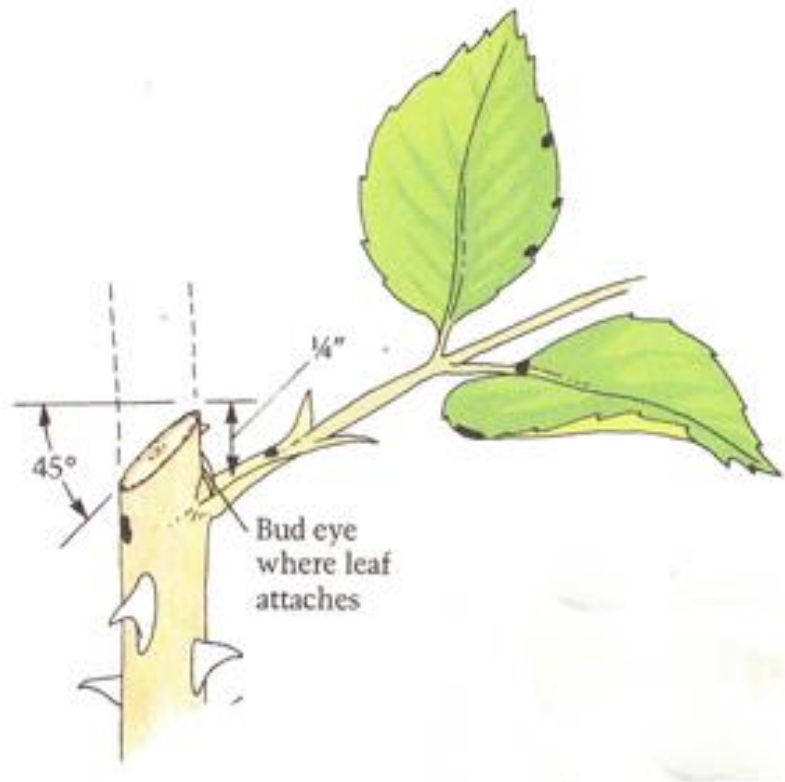
All your roses can be pruned now with the goal of shaping the plant the way you want them. It's best to start by going in and getting rid of all the large growth from the top of the plant so you can get the bulk out of the way to do your more detailed pruning.



There is no right or wrong way on how severe you prune your roses. How aggressively you prune depends on a number of things...your personal preference, the goals you have for growing roses, what fits in your landscape, etc.



Once you have the bulk out the way, we should prune to an outward facing bud eye on strong, thick canes.



Cut at a 45 degree angle approximately 1/4" above an outward facing bud eye.



Try to open up the center of the plant so sunshine can get to the center of the plant. Remove branches that grow towards the center, leaving strong thick canes that are pushing out away from the center.

Climbers are treated a bit differently. These are pruned to adapt to how we want them to grow...on to a lattice, arbor, or some other supporting structure. Climbing roses don't actually climb or cling to structures on their own, so we have to train them to the shape we want and tie canes to support them. Climbers are bred for long canes that allow us to shape them to whatever we want to "climb" them on to.

As with other roses, all the old leaves should be removed from climbers. One of your goals in picking a place to grow a climber is having room to allow the maximum number of canes to grow parallel to the ground. Roses want to bloom at the ends of their canes as you see on your typical shrubs. You can fool climbers into thinking they have lots of cane ends by lining those long canes up parallel to the ground. Wherever there's a bud eye, there's potential for a bloom on that cane provided it is growing parallel, or close to parallel, to the ground. Space and the form you are growing your climber onto have a huge effect on your ability to do this. Here's some examples of pruned climbers and different architecture for your climbing roses.





After you have all your pruning, leaf removal and ground cleaned up, you're ready to move on to thinking about dormancy sprays and prefeeding.

Dormancy Sprays. Besides getting all the dead leaves off your plants and getting all the debris cleaned up around your roses, dormancy sprays have a positive effect in limiting the various maladies and pests from taking root in your garden. Powdery mildew is our most prolific problem here in the valley. Nurseries frequently experience blackspot problems and some of our wetter, cooler areas in the state deal with other types of mildew problems.

There are a number of products you can use for dormancy sprays. Depending on your strategy, you can use just one type of spray or use a series of sprays in response to what kind of threats you think you have in your garden.

Organic oils are an excellent way to smother insect pests that are still left either on your plants or hiding in the ground.





Copper or sulfur based products are available to spray on the plants and the ground to knock down the fungal problems that create mildew and blackspot. There are also other products available for this...potassium bicarbonate is a good one, as the plants can utilize the potassium as a micronutrient.



The best time to spray these products is just prior to new growth pushing out on the canes. Sometimes we can't get the spray on fast enough as in most years the plants are already pushing new growth by the time we're pruning. In these cases, read the product's label directions...there is frequently a dilution level that is safe for plants exhibiting new growth at the time of spraying. It is important to follow label directions at all times and be sure to dress to protect yourself from exposure to chemicals that may be harmful to humans.

Feeding. Fertilizers typically need warmer weather and moisture to become viable to the plant, so it's best to start feeding your plants again when we start having warmer days. However; I'm not opposed to broadcasting micronutrients earlier than you would normally apply a concentrated fertilizer. Because our soils and water here in the valley run a higher pH than we'd like, broadcasting soil sulfur in the winter is not a bad practice along with gypsum if you have heavy clay soils that need loosening up. In addition, roses LOVE magnesium and iron, so I've taken to broadcasting Epsom salts and Ironite earlier in the spring than my first concentrated fertilizer feeding. All these micronutrients are included in my first fertilizer feeding as well.

There are a number of excellent fertilizers designed for roses available and some special starter formulas carrying the micronutrients I mentioned above along with alfalfa meal, blood meal, cottonseed meal and other "tried and true" ingredients. I encourage you to feed your roses...they love to be fed and will respond to correct feeding...especially those of you planning to show roses this spring. As the growing season progresses, it's a good idea to "rotate" your fertilizer program in order to deliver both fast acting and slow release forms of the major and minor nutrients your plants need.

Conclusion. I know this article may be too general for some and for many of us, preparing for Spring is old news, but I think I've hit the high lights of what needs to be done to get your growing season started off right.