

# Planting and Pruning

by **Bob Martin, ARS President**

*From the Rookie Rosarian Series*



January is the time to plant and prune roses. While rosarians in colder climates are sitting by the fire reading rose catalogues, we who live in Southern California have work to do. You can start pruning just about anytime after

Christmas and that is usually when the bareroot roses begin to arrive in the local nurseries. You can both plant and prune throughout January and through about Valentine's Day. *LEFT: Pruned entrance*



## ***Pruning***

Pruning time normally sends rose growers back to their books and out to pruning demonstrations and lectures to refresh their memories on the principles of pruning. There they will encounter

numerous instructions on proper pruning technique, some of which are contradictory, and much of which scares them into thinking that if they don't do it exactly right, something terrible will happen to their roses. Don't believe it. You can't screw up the pruning of a rose. (Actually you can, but this would require you to cut under the bud union, which is something I have actually seen done, so let us just say that it is very hard to screw up the pruning of a rose.) *ABOVE: Bareroot roses*

In an effort to bring some order to this confusion I once developed ten simple principles that provided guidance on pruning large roses – hybrid teas and grandifloras. I no longer believe two of them – or maybe it's because I've gotten older and more economical – so now there's eight. These I describe below. And, with minor modifications, mentioned at the close, these eight principles also apply to pruning floribundas, shrubs, miniature and miniflora roses. Climbers require a somewhat different approach that I will also describe at the end.

As with any project, the place to start is with a plan. Thus the first rule is:



*1. Plan Your Pruning From the Ground Up.*

Most rose growers start the pruning process from the top, standing over their roses and nibbling away with pruning shears as if they were barbers giving their roses a trim. This

wastes time; it is also ineffective. The purpose of pruning is to select the strong, healthy canes that will support this year's growth. The stuff at the top is last year's history. Get down on your knees (sit down if it's more comfortable) and look at the bud union and the canes that come from it. Think about new growth and turn to rule number 2:

*ABOVE: Pruned minifloras*

## *2. If It's Too Old To Cut It, Cut It.*

Identify the newest canes. They are the ones that are the greenest. Then identify any older canes. (If your bush is young--say two to three years old--you may not have much in the way of older canes.) Like people, they are the ones that are craggy and gray. This is not the time for nostalgia. The old gray ones usually have weak spindly growth on them and are in the way of brand new canes that are now only a gleam in the bud union's dormant eyes. Use your loppers or handy pruning saw and cut the old buzzards off flush with the bud union. When this is accomplished, turn to rule number 3:

## *3. If It's In the Way, Cut It Away.*

New growth needs room and the ideal plant grows out from the center. Identify any canes that cross directly over the center and cut them off with your loppers or pruning

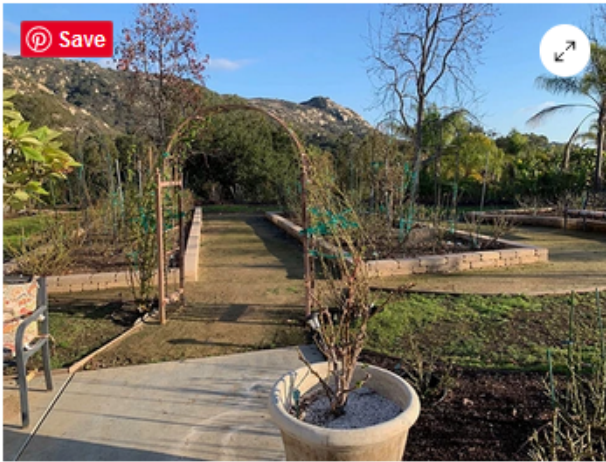


saw flush with the bud union or, as is more generally the case, flush with the cane from which they have decided to grow in the wrong direction. Also, identify any canes that are seriously crowding each other. If they are not too close you can wedge them apart with a piece of stem cut from the plant. If not, cut them out with your loppers or pruning saw, again flush with the bud union or the cane from which they are growing. The remaining canes are now your bush and are ready to be pruned back – leading to the next rule:

ABOVE: Pruned floribundas.

#### *4. The Height Is As Simple As 1-2-3.*

The relative merits of severe versus light pruning are debated at length in the rose literature. Most proponents of severe pruning are from areas that require winter protection for their roses. Since the cold is going to kill back long canes anyway this makes sense. The proponents of very light pruning are either too faint-hearted, or have an inordinate love of bushy foliage and small blooms on short stems. In our Southern California climate, neither approach makes sense. Mentally divide the cane into three equal parts and prepare to remove the top one-third. Before you do, however, proceed to rule number 5:



#### *5. For All You Do, This Bud's For You.*

If you are unusually lucky, exactly 2/3rds of the way up the cane (or 1/3rd down depending on whether you have now stood up) will be an outward facing bud eye. Bud eyes are found

at the intersection of the cane and a leaflet of five. They will also develop from what looks like an expanded band on the cane. Sometimes they are obvious; other times less so. There should be several and the generally preferred ones face out. But it is not necessary to be slavish to the outside eye rule. Where the canes come out at a 45-degree or greater angle, a cut to the outside facing eye can often result in a horizontally spreading bush with canes that fall of their own weight. This is particularly true of bushes that tend to naturally grow horizontally. A cut to an inner facing eye in such cases will usually produce a cane that goes straight up, the best way for roses to grow. What if there are no properly placed bud eyes? Find one and work with what you've got. If you haven't got any, double check your eyesight and if there are really no eyes of promise conclude that God didn't intend the cane to live anyway. This brings us to a very important and seemingly heartless rule:

*ABOVE: Pruned Dona's English Garden.*

### *6. When In Doubt, Cut It Out.*

Many rose growers are somewhat squeamish about pruning, for fear they will harm a plant that produces such beautiful and delicate blooms. Don't let the blooms fool you – a rose bush is one tough cookie. How else could the rose have survived without the loving care of rosarians for hundreds of millions of years? The bush will take care of itself, so if you're puzzling about whether to leave that little stem that, although unpromising, might do something – cut it off. This takes us to rule number 7:

### *7. Leave No Leaves.*

Strip all the remaining leaves. They too are last year's history. You want new leaves that can get a good start without catching fungus infections or facing attack from the bugs hanging around the old leaves. After this, your bush should be looking pretty bare and you can wrap up your work with a little advice that sounds like it came from Mom:

### *8. Clean Up After Yourself.*

Gather up all the canes, stems, leaves and miscellaneous stuff you've generated, bag it up and throw it away. While you're at it, yank the weeds from around the bush and get rid of all the dead leaves and dried up old petals lying around. All of last year's fungus and insect problems are lying around in this stuff waiting for the new blooms. And don't bother to compost it. Rose canes don't decompose well and the spores, eggs and other things in the mess will survive composting efforts quite well. Finally, lay down some new mulch to make things look real neat. Your Mom will be proud of you and will love the roses that bloom in the spring, tra la.



As mentioned, the above rules also generally apply to floribundas and shrubs, however the trick here is to prune more lightly and to not worry about leaving thin stems. The rules also generally

work on miniatures, minifloras and polyanthas; however, since they are usually growing on their own roots, you can leave a lot more canes. In fact, careful pruning can get rather tedious so some growers simply prune off the top third with hedge shears like a shrub and get pretty good results. *LEFT: Pruned OGRs*

Climbers make long canes and typically bloom from lateral stems coming off those canes. So you don't want to cut back the long canes. Instead, the objective is to train them (the fancy term here is "espalier") so that the canes are as horizontal as possible. This encourages the lateral growth and the resulting blooms. So the best thing to do with climbers is to wrestle with them and tie them up so that they will grow as you want them to grow. You can remove the leaves and all the scrawny stuff that is not going anywhere.



### ***Planting***

Roses that arrive in the local nurseries generally do so as bareroot roses, even when not sold as such. Some nurseries still follow the old-fashioned approach of selling bareroot roses in sand or sawdust, but this has become somewhat rare. Many simply obtain the roses pre-packaged from the wholesale supplier; others receive them

bareroot and pot them up on arrival. Consider them all bareroot roses unless you know they have been in the container for a while. *LEFT: Bareroot roses*

At the beginning you should take a 32-gallon trash can and fill it nearly to the top with water. If you are a believer in magic – or just want to do something magical that might make a difference – add a tablespoon of Jump Start. You could also grind up eight aspirin tablets and throw them in as well. I sometimes throw in other magical ingredients depending on what I believe at the moment. Then remove the bareroot rose(s) from their package or container and place them in the trash can with the water covering them if possible. You can get six or eight roses in a trash can; just be careful in shoving them in that you are not breaking canes and roots.

The roses should be kept in the water for a minimum of 24 hours and ideally 48 to 72 hours. I'm not sure what the outside limit is but can tell you I've kept roses in water for over a month without adverse effect.

You should note from this advice that you cannot buy roses at the local nursery and plant them the same weekend. Mail order roses generally arrive midweek and should be promptly removed from their packages and put in water. Mail order roses and those in packages tend to be more dried out so they should get at least 48 hours in the water.

I start all of my roses in containers and it has been many years since I have planted bare root roses directly in the ground. A container, however, is simply a moveable hole and since most rookies will want to get their roses in the ground I will describe the planting as if the hole is in the ground.

The first thing to do is dig a hole. "How big?" you ask. I have seen precise measurements given for rose holes but the answer is that it depends on the size of the root system of the rose that you intend to plant. The objective is to have a hole that is plenty large enough to accommodate the root system without having to bend the roots or trim them. There are occasional long heavy roots that may need to be trimmed but this is unusual; preservation of the root system is your objective.

The next thing to do is to select and prepare a planting mix. My soil in Pasadena and Arizona was heavy clay as is much of the soil in Southern California. Clay soils hold water and need to be amended to permit drainage. On the other hand, my soil is Escondido is decomposed granite that drains like crazy. It needs to be amended to promote water retention. So you're going to need to know what your soil is and how it drains. If you're not sure, then dig a hole and fill it



with water to see how fast it drains. If the water is still there the next morning, you have clay soil and need to improve drainage. If the water is all gone in an hour or two, you need to improve the water retention of the soil.

In selecting a planting mix you want organic matter such as composted tree parts. What goes with it depends on your soil. Peat moss holds water, as does clay. Vermiculite is a clay that is closely related to bentonite, which is better known as kitty litter. Perlite and sand provide for drainage and air spaces. Do not use a planting mix in a clay soil that contains vermiculite. Don't add sand or perlite to a sandy soil. Read the label on your planting mix. If your natural soil is halfway decent, you should throw some in the wheelbarrow with your planting mix. I use about 1/3rd natural soil and the rest is a planting mix augmented sometimes augmented with vermiculite (remember - I have fast-draining soil.)

Put some of the planting mix at the bottom of the hole and then add a handful of triple super phosphate or a 1/2 cup of bone meal. Put it in piles or mounds; do not mix it in the mix or just scatter it around. Then cover it with more planting mix and build a mound in the center of the hole.

Remove the rose bush from the water. Examine the root system and cut off any broken roots. Then examine the canes. Remove obviously twiggy growth and any broken canes. Hopefully you'll have remaining the three good canes a #1 rose is supposed to have. Examine each

cane to find an outward facing bud eye or ribbed growth area and cut just above it at a 45° angle with the angle away from the bud eye.

Set the rose on the mound and determine where the bud union is in relationship to the surface of the ground. (The bud union is the big knob where the canes are attached to the rootstock.) Laying a yardstick or other straight edge at the level of the hole will help with this. You will want the bud union to be about an inch above the ground's surface. Since a rose will settle, it is best to see that the bud union stands out about two inches above the surface of the ground. Build up the mound with additional soil until the rose is at the right level. The roots should then be spread on the edge of the mound and not folded back.

Then fill in the hole with your soil and firm it with your hands. (Do not use your feet to firm soil around a new rose.) Fill the planted hole with water (the water from your trash can will do) and allow it to drain; this will cause the soil to settle. Add additional soil to complete the hole and then keep adding until you have built a mound that covers the bud union. Gently water the rose with a water wand but be careful not to wash the soil off the bud union.

Thereafter keep the mounded soil moist and water regularly. After several weeks when new growth emerges you can begin to slowly wash the mound off the bud union. There is no reason to be in a hurry about this and it will happen in time anyway.

Your roses are off to a good start; next month we'll start thinking about a disease and pest control program.

*Photos by Bob Martin*