

The Kindest Cut

Tomorrow is the day that even the most absent minded of husbands turns up with something suitable wrapped with a red bow in honor of St. Valentine's Day. Ladies, he may forget birthdays, including his own, and anniversaries, but the splendid efficiency of American marketing has guaranteed that tomorrow may feature a red, red rose.

A rose of any color is perhaps the world's most beloved flower and gardeners young and old, with or without green fingers will plant roses. The good news is that roses have been bred over many decades so that they are less prone to black spot, rust and assorted ills. Just to keep it simple, plan on one or two old fashioned shrub roses with heavenly fragrance and then work up gradually to having a prima donna hybrid tea.

Valentine's Day is always an excuse to bring roses into the conversation but actually February is the month for pruning roses and the fourteenth is as good a day as any to start! Words of advice from the rose experts: do not worry about any mistakes you may make in your pruning techniques as the very worst mistake you can make it to not prune that rose at all! That is supposed to be a comfort but aside from sharp pruners and protective gloves, you may wonder what comes next? An aside: gloves are important. I have a permanent knot in one thumb from where parts of the same thorn have been exhumed three times. The gloves I was wearing were those knit ones with coated palms and fingers. I do love them as they are close fitting and flexible. But if you are serious about pruning roses wear heavy leather gloves, cumbersome as they may be. Two other small bumps on my arm attest to the scaring that can result from encounters with thorns stabbing through jacket sleeves.

Rosarians call those damaging extrusions on stems "prickles" but as dangerous as they are we can be forgiven for calling them thorns. Prickle is much too playful a word for them. The two are botanically different: a prickle is an outgrowth on the bark or epidermis of a plant; a thorn is a woody projection on the stem. The problem prickles cause is an Rh disease, Sporothrichosis caused by *Sporothrix schenckii*. So be careful as you don't need more than the lumps and bumps that come with time.

About tools: sharp is essential as you want a clean cut. A ragged cut is an invitation to disease. And the pruners should be small enough to cut precisely, about a quarter of an inch above a dormant bud. Those big old loppers do a lot of work in a hurry but roses deserve your best efforts! A moderate angle is good, no more than about 45 degrees with the dormant bud being at the top of the angle. Incidentally, this angle business is the way to cut a rose for a vase or deadhead summer blooms.

There are general rules for pruning roses that hold regardless of where you live or what kinds of roses you may have. The shrub roses that bloom all season can benefit from having as much as two-thirds of the plant removed, unless you need the bulk to hide your trash cans, dog house etc. On roses that bloom only once a year, leave lots of old wood; prune just enough to keep the plant within its allotted space. Of course if you have a climber or a rose destined to cover a trellis, remove just dead, diseased, and badly positioned branches.

On any rose, aside from removing the dead wood, thin out the plant to allow good air circulation and enhance the overall shape of the shrub. To encourage new growth cut out some of the oldest canes, those that are thickest with tougher bark that is grey or dark brown. A general rule of thumb is to remove about a third of the total stems, branches, and twigs. However it is your rose and your garden so any rules are subject to your approval.

A further tip, especially good for climbing roses is to step back and study those long canes, concentrate on the shoots shooting out from them sideways and clip those off to three to six inches long. Now, the last step, is to cut off the tips of the longest canes. That last cut encourages the cane to produce new side shoots all along its length. When May comes you will have enough blooms for several valentines.

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