

It's a  
 Snip!

The Definitive  
Wych Cross Guide

to the cut & thrust of  
**Pruning  
Roses**



# Introduction

Gardening is pretty much like economics really. Nobody knows exactly what's going on for sure except the experts - and they never agree.

Of course that's why gardening programmes on the radio are so entertaining. Although there may be some intrinsic interest in hearing John Cushnie explain that *Rosa sweginzowii macrocarpa* needs damp acid soil and will make a compact little bush which will benefit from hard pruning, what we are all listening for is how Pippa Greenwood is tactfully going to explain that actually it will only thrive in dry chalk and grows into a spreading shrub 15' high which should never be pruned at all. And then of course Bob Flowerdew will tell us that the answer is a bit of old carpet!

But I digress. The point is that nowhere in all gardening practice is this divergence of expert views more evident than in pruning roses. And if you're a simple, insecure soul like me it can be very disturbing because we like to be told exactly what to do and then we can confidently get on and do it. Now this absolutely won't work with pruning roses. No sooner have you decided that at long last you've learnt the formula for success than the next authority you consult tells you the exact opposite.

No, to avoid a nervous breakdown you have to apply the First (and only) Wych Cross Law of Rose Pruning which is this - RELAX! It really doesn't matter how you prune your roses because somewhere out there, there's an expert to back you up!

## What is Pruning?

A good question. It is simply the removal of those stems, or parts of stems, which will not bear

satisfactory flowers so that all the resources of the plant are concentrated on those stems that will. Added to which the good stems will have more space in which to develop properly.

## Why Bother Anyway?

An even better question. The reason for pruning roses - the key to it all which is so stunningly simple, but which once grasped will deliver you from pruning paranoia forever - is that rose stems are temporary. You see, although roses have been around for several thousand years they adopt a very modern throwaway lifestyle. They know that in the natural course of things they are liable to lose their branches to frost in winter, fire in summer, and deer and rabbits all the year round. So a rose stem is designed for only a few years of effective life after which the plant will throw up a new shoot as a replacement and will starve the old one. All pruning does is to assist in, and take advantage of, this natural process. Why bother? A casual glance at any dog rose growing in the wild or at any bramble patch should convince you.

## When are you going to actually tell me how to prune my roses?

Quite! With our extensive knowledge of the life cycle of the rose it's now very simple. Whatever variety of rose you are confronting - whether a miniature or a monster - the pruning process can helpfully be divided into two stages. The first stage applies to all roses and the second stage varies somewhat according to the type of rose.

# Stage 1

Remember the 3 'R's? (Reading, Writing, and Rugby it was at my school) Well forget them. What you need to remember for Stage 1 is the 4 'D's. Consider the rose in front of you. If any part of it falls into these categories cut it out without further ado:-

- Dead - Bring out your dead! (all of it)
- Diseased - Cut back to where the pith is a healthy white colour
- Damaged - Cut back below the damage
- Deficient - Old wood, is it weakening? If so, cut it right out together with any thin straggly shoots

You're now left with exactly the same plant that nature would have produced, except you've accomplished in 5 minutes what would otherwise have taken several years

# Stage 2

This is where we need to look at the different types of rose, unless you are looking at a brand new rose, in which case it should be cut back very hard whatever it is to encourage plenty of vigorous new growth from the base. (If you buy your roses from Wych Cross this will already have been done for you.)

## Bush Roses (Hybrid Teas & Floribundas)

Where these are grown in beds they are in effect permanent bedding plants and here a degree of uniformity is in order. As to how hard to prune, a good deal of leeway is possible according to taste, but bear in mind these principles:-

- Hard pruning will produce later, fewer but bigger blooms.
- Light pruning will produce earlier, more but smaller blooms.

As a general guide I rather like the Wellington Boot Principle. This highly technical procedure was expounded to me by the Royal National Rose Society so it must be good. To apply it just stand next to your pruned roses. Hybrid Teas should come about half-way up your boot, while the height of floribundas should be level with the top of your wellies. (I told you it was technical stuff!) But this principle should be tempered by the fact that vigorous varieties such as 'Peace' should be pruned much more lightly than the weaker varieties. PRUNE WEAK GROWTH HARD.

**Where to Cut?**- make your pruning cut just above a dormant bud if there's a convenient one. Cut the stem at an angle rather than straight across so that rain will not run onto the bud. If possible chose a bud pointing in the direction you want the new growth to go. Normally this will be outwards. If there isn't a convenient bud facing the right way (and lets face it, that's most of the time!) don't panic! Just cut back to the length you want anyway.

**When to Cut?** Any time during the dormant season will do. Its not critical. Earlier pruning will encourage earlier flowering, provided the new shoots are not cut back by the frost

## Climbers & Ramblers

Some books differentiate between different sorts of climbing roses with different pruning methods for each. That's really not necessary. For a start, stop worrying about the difference between climbers and ramblers because when you get down to it they're all roses that climb. Certainly, for pruning purposes you can treat them all the same.

Prune climbing roses in the late autumn. (If you do it by

the 5th November you can usefully put the prunings on your Bonfire!)

Keep the main stems in place and prune back the side shoots to two or three buds except for the most vigorous which can be treated as new main stems and tied into place.

It is totally impractical to attempt to prune the bigger ramblers, which are growing over buildings or into trees, so don't even try!

('Mermaid' and the Banksian roses should only be pruned very lightly.)

## Once Flowering Shrub Roses

You can actually get away with leaving these roses virtually unpruned, although after a few years you will be faced with a fairly substantial thinning job to get rid of the older, less productive wood. The more conventional technique is:-

- Cut back main stems by about one third
- Cut back side shoots by about two thirds
- Prune as soon after flowering as possible

But in my view you will get the best results with these roses for just a little more effort if you follow this technique:-

- In early summer just when the flower buds are showing colour, cut back all the new vegetative growth to the height of the flowers. This enables the plant to put all its strength into flowering and you to see the flowers!
- Repeat this process in late summer
- Prune as necessary in the winter, cutting back the outer stems further than those in the centre to produce a nice domed effect. Actually it's a good plan to allow young roses to only keep about 1' (30cm) of new growth each year until they reach maturity. This will encourage the formation of a good bushy habit.

## Repeat Flowering Shrub Roses

As repeat flowering makes heavier demands on the plant more attention needs to be given to pruning. Treat these shrubs more like bush roses, but do not cut back nearly so hard especially in the early years. Remember that we are aiming for an attractive looking shrub here and not a bedding plant.

China Roses, despite repeat flowering, need very little pruning except the removal of some old wood.

Hybrid Perpetuals often tend to very tall upright growth habits, and here the main stems may need to be cut back by as much as one half in order to make a presentable shrub.

Prune during the dormant season as for bush roses.

## Species Roses

No pruning necessary beyond Stage 1.

## A Word about Equipment

Actually only two things are essential. They are:-

- An up-to-date tetanus injection
- A decent pair of secateurs

But as I'm in the business of selling you things you wouldn't expect me to stop there. No sir! You will also benefit from thornproof gloves (yes they do exist!), long-handled loppers, a pruning saw, kneeling pad, a mechanical hedge-trimmer for when you're in happy-go-lucky mode, and for those really desperate occasions when all else fails - a chainsaw!

But back to the secateurs. They come in bewildering

variety but can basically be divided into two. Those that are made by a company called Felco and those that aren't. It can't be denied that Felcos are more expensive, but quite honestly for quality there is nothing on the market to touch them. They last forever; every component is replaceable; and Felco will service them for you in ten years time if you wish. And if you have invested in a pair it's well worthwhile spending a little more for a holster that clips to your belt or pocket. Apart from not wasting hours trying to remember where you last put them down you'll know that you'll always be quick on the prune!

Look after your secateurs. Don't use them to cut bamboo canes, barbed wire, or kindling for the bonfire. Also do not use them as a hoe to locate the source of those suckers. And do keep them sharp. Sharpening stones are inexpensive and blunt secateurs will do your roses no good at all.

## Summary

1. Pruning is an art not a science. We are after a pleasing effect not slavishly following a rule book.
2. There's considerable room to manoeuvre. Don't be intimidated!
3. Understand that you are simply co-operating with the natural process of constant replacement of old stems by new ones.
4. Don't be content with pruning your existing roses.

Practice makes perfect.

Buy some new ones!

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