

Don't Be Afraid to Spring Prune Your Roses

By Bill Langford, *Consulting Rosarian*

You have probably have heard me say or write about not cutting long stems in hot weather in order to retain as much foliage on the bush as possible. This is because the foliage helps keep shade the plant and provides for more transpiration (like a person's perspiration evaporating to help cool them). In the winter and spring, things are different. I hope you have been cutting some long-stemmed roses. If so, you have given yourself a little head start on pruning.

Between late January and early February is a great time to do some major cutting on rose bushes in South Florida. Reducing the size of the established bushes by one-third to one-half will be of benefit to them. Young or small bushes should only be lightly trimmed.

Pruning can be a daunting task for novice rose growers. However, pruning does a favor to your rose bushes and they handle it quite well. I have never lost a rose bush due to pruning. Here are some quick tips.

Start slow: dead, diseased, twigggy. If you are new to pruning, it is okay to start slow. First remove dead canes and twigggy growth (normally defined as stems that are smaller in diameter than a pencil). Then look for canes that are rubbing against each other. If you find any, remove the cane that is less healthy or growing in the wrong direction.

Cut above outward-facing bud eyes. Next, cut back taller canes, always cutting just above an outward-facing bud eye. Historically, it has been recommended to make the cut at a 45-degree angle, but this has not been proven to have any great benefit. If you are unsure how much to cut off of a cane, then remove no more than one-quarter of the total length. Move on to the next cane. After you have a cut a few canes, stand back and look at the shape of the bush. If it looks good, you can move on to the next bush. If you think it could benefit from additional cutting and shaping, go ahead and recut some canes.

Sharpen your pruners. The cuts you make while pruning should be sharp and clean. If they are not or it is difficult to cut a cane, try sharpening (or replacing) the blade on your pruners. Your pruners should be the by-pass type and not the anvil type. It is also highly recommended that you disinfect your pruners between pruning each different bush so you are less likely to spread disease between bushes. This can be done with spraying the blades alcohol or with *LysoI™* or using *LysoI™* wipes. Do not use bleach, as it can damage steel pruner blades. It is a good practice to clean, dry and store your pruners (inside).

Remove remaining foliage. In most cases, when you have completed spring pruning, there will not be many leaves left. Then you can remove the remaining foliage. In the unlikely event that you have a lot of healthy foliage remaining, it can be left on the bush. All cuttings and leaves should be put out for collection and not left in the rose bed or put in a compost bin. They can be harboring disease or unwanted pests, which you do not want attacking your new growth.

Seal the cut canes. After you have completed pruning, it is recommended that you seal the cuts on larger canes. Simply apply a small amount of *Elmer's Glue-All™* on the cut end of each cane. Try not to get any glue on the bud eyes. If you have a lot of stems left (which will be the case with some varieties) you should concentrate on sealing the larger canes and don't bother with the smaller ones. Just make sure that you are not expecting rain when you do the sealing, as the glue will wash away if it has not had time to dry.