

Five Observations on Pruning Roses

By Jim Delahanty

More people exhibit angst about pruning roses than growing them. And, otherwise sensible people invest more time, trouble and research into pruning roses than in seeking a mate. Demonstrations on pruning roses are so popular and valued that some groups charge fees for attending such events. The distress and anxiety with which many people approach pruning is not inexplicable. The problem is not with the rose, but the pruner. Below are a few considerations to tame the psychological pruning beast, at least over the next few months.

Firstly. Roses are tough. The angst and anxiety over pruning is a confession of personal inadequacy, not one of any inadequacy of the rose. Roy Hennessey, plantsman extraordinaire of the middle of the 20th century, headed his newspaper columns with the observation that you could do ANYTHING to a rose, except grub it up out of the ground and leave it there, and it would thrive. This is pretty much true. Pruning roses within an inch of their lives does not prevent them from recovering and blooming; a famous award winning rosarian in southern California never pruned his roses at all. A prominent Bay area rosarian spends five seconds on each rose with his chainsaw. Roses have been in existence for over 35 million years and in most of that time, no one pruned anything unless the forest were burned to a crisp, nature's rather non-specific pruning method.

Secondo. Much of our pruning has evolved because of human concerns, not because of the need of the rose per se. While some roses need to have pruning utilized to stimulate growth—particularly root growth, others are yearlong bloomers and resent interference in their bloom cycle. 'Secret Garden Musk Climber' blooms twelve months out of the year in my garden; any pruning is a matter of confining it to the space allotted to it, and it certainly doesn't need rejuvenation.

Sometimes we prune our roses in a particular way in order to promote a congruity between peak bloom time and particular rose shows, like district rose shows in April, particularly if the roses are modern ones like Hybrid teas, floribundas or miniatures. Or we may prune because we have misplaced a rose when planting it and have to keep cutting it back lest it completely and fatally block a path and injure someone, or worse yet, scratch the paint job on a new car. Sometimes we prune for aesthetic or artistic reasons; there is a rose, Santa Catalina, planted on a grey fieldstone wall at the Roseraie de l'Hay in the Val de Marne, south of Paris, that blooms in increments of about six inches—a tribute to the pruner's art, since it involves encouraging and suppressing bud eyes all along the canes in question. In another section, the rose bush is contorted into the shape of a shamrock. Since no one has yet filed a suit on behalf of the rose in any known court of law, presumably the rose does not care in either case. But we do. It is the fact of our concerns that elicits much of the drive to prune roses.

Thirdly. The only constant in pruning is to remove dead wood and criss-crossing branches. Once you have accomplished that task, you have completed your pruning chores for many roses. You are done. Stop. Do no more. Many chinas and polyanthas require no more. You may choose to do more for any of the reasons listed above, or for idiosyncratic reasons of your own, but the rose doesn't care.

Fourthly. Pruning time in mild climate Southern California is traditionally between Thanksgiving and Valentine's Day. It is the time of the year when the roses are least productive, when many of

them shed their leaves, and succumb to the vicissitudes of dead and dying foliage (rust, mildew, and general miasma). But, in fact, pruning takes place all across the calendar in the fullest sense of the word, with the removal of spent blooms, blind shoots, and/or dieback of canes. As E.B. Le Grice pointed out in 'Rose Growing Complete,' in a mild climate, roses may be pruned at any time of the year. Given that it normally takes about six weeks between flushes of bloom, a second flush of blooms appropriate for a rose show requires pruning in the first month of the year here in southern California as opposed to some other choice. But if you are not going to exhibit in rose shows, you can pretty well pick a time available to you. Once again, you are free to choose—unless you have some pressing concern like a wedding that requires roses at a particular time. But if you do, be aware that your pruning concerns are driven by exogenous concerns, not those of the rose.

Fifthly. Roses resemble individuals in being difficult to squeeze in a box (either those of a physical sort like some of the 'body bags' found in the supers or intellectual ones for convenience in consideration). And when you consider that a half dozen species may have contributed to the development of a particular rose, it is no wonder that individual roses have individual cachets. 'Brandy,' for example, dislikes being hard pruned and will sulk if treated that way. 'Niles Cochet,'—or whatever is the identification of a rose purchased as 'Mme Jules Graveraux'—is a climbing tea rose that negates the normal rule that tea roses pout if hard pruned. If I didn't hard prune it, it would strangle several neighborhood dogs, not to mention the postman. And it continues to pump out hundreds of blooms most every month. The person pruning a rose has an obligation to find out what particular characteristics define the individual rose in the garden.

At the San Jose Heritage Rose Garden there are four different clones of the same 'Rosette Delizy.' Although each one is clearly 'Rosette Delizy,' the differences are also clear; some are more vigorous than others, while the color is more pronounced—even gaudy—in others. Finding out the personal characteristics of your roses is not a matter of consulting books, or even reading VCRS newsletters. It is a question of observation and assessment while working in the garden. It also dictates what kind of advice might be given to others.

I once waited five years for 'Dupuy Jamain' to bloom and never pruned it in that time span. For that reason I never recommend it to anyone for a home garden unless the individual someone wants a rare and unusual rose of great beauty, powerful fragrance, and relentless vigor. The rose is comfortable with itself. The trouble begins and ends with the gardener. So, take your valium or Xanax, reserve the Demerol for post-operative pain, and let the pruning begin.