

Winter Rose Pruning

In order to enjoy a spectacular bloom of roses in May, it is important to prune your rose bushes in the winter months. For Oklahoma, February is the best time to prune and shape dormant rose bushes, before spring growth begins to show in late March. One way to remember when to prune roses is to wait for President's Day. When pruning your roses, it is important to know the variety of rose you have. For example, certain antique roses only bloom once a year and their buds form on last year's wood, so they should be pruned after they bloom in the spring.

The majority of modern roses are referred to as "remontant" or reblooming. These bushes should be trimmed in the winter months so new blooms can form on the spring growth. While it is not recommended to prune rose bushes in early fall due potential new growth that could be damaged by unforeseen early freezing temperatures, in the dead of winter roses are dormant and their shape can be easily seen.

Old, dead growth should be removed at this time so the bush can grow to a healthy form and shape with more abundant blooms. Modern, or ever-blooming roses, should be cut back by about one-half to two-thirds of the plant's height to encourage new growth and blooms, leaving 3 to 5 healthy canes evenly spaced around the plant. Antique roses, modern shrub roses (Knockouts, for example), or English roses should be pruned for shape.

To know how much to cut, a general rule of thumb on most plants, shrubs and trees is to remove no more than 1/3 of the total structure at any given time. This keeps the plant from going into shock. But, for roses, that rule is expanded, and depends on how you want the rose bush to look. Severe pruning (cut to leave three or four canes, 6 to 10 inches high) produces fewer but larger blooms; moderate pruning (five to 12 canes cut to 18 to 24 inches) makes for a larger bush; light pruning (less than one-third of the plant is thinned out) increases the number of short-stemmed flowers that will be produced. Prune the rose canes to an outward facing bud so the new growth will grow to the outside of the rose, not inward.

Climbing roses and ramblers can be left unpruned for the first few years. With large climbers, pruning is usually done only to clean up dead wood. Training your climber horizontally on a trellis encourages more blooms. Cut long side shoots or laterals to 3-6 inches to stimulate flower production for a spectacular display of flowers in May.

Make sure to disinfect your pruning shears before moving on to another rose bush as you could unknowingly spread infection from one plant to the other with contaminated pruning shears.

After all the pruning is finished, follow up with a spray of dormant oil or Sulphur to kill overwintering aphids or pests. Make sure to clear all the old dead leaves from underneath your rose bushes as these old leaves can harbor blackspot and other unwanted visitors. Start adding organic fertilizer such as manure, compost, or blood meal to your soil now and follow up with an inorganic fertilizer in spring for vigorous growth.