Spring Rose Pruning: Setting Up for a Strong Summer

By Rick Roberts, President, CPDHS

As winter loosens its grip and temperatures begin to warm, April is the time to get after your roses. In our Zone 5 climate, a good spring pruning goes a long way toward keeping plants healthy, improving air flow, and setting the stage for a full season of blooms.



Timing matters. You're looking for that window after the risk of deep cold has passed, when buds are just starting to swell but before the plant has leafed out. Around Carleton Place, that's usually mid to late April, give or take depending on the year.

Start with clean, sharp tools. A good pair of bypass pruners will handle most of the work, though older, thicker canes may call for loppers. It's worth wiping your tools down between plants to avoid spreading disease.

First, deal with any winter damage. This past season brought a stretch of colder-than-normal weather, and many roses are showing more die-back than usual. Dead wood will look dark and brittle, while living tissue is green and moist inside. If you're unsure, lightly scrape the bark with your thumbnail. Green means it's still alive, brown means it's time to go. Prune back to healthy wood, making your cut about a quarter inch above an outward-facing bud, angled slightly so water sheds off.

Once the dead and damaged wood is out, take a look at the overall structure. Remove any canes that cross or rub together, since those spots can become entry points for insects and disease. The goal is an open, vase-like shape that allows light and air to reach the centre of the plant.

How hard you prune depends on the type of rose. Hybrid teas and floribundas can be, and probably need to be cut back quite firmly, often to about 12 to 18 inches. Shrub roses usually just need some thinning, shaping and removal of winter-killed canes. With climbers, go easy in spring. Remove dead wood and focus on tying canes in more horizontally. Canes trained at a shallow angle, up to about 45 degrees, tend to produce the most flowers.

When you're finished, clean up thoroughly around the base of the plant. Diseased material shouldn't go into the compost—I prefer to burn it or dispose of it in the garbage. A layer of compost or well-rotted manure will give your roses a good start, and mulch will help hold moisture and keep weeds down, especially if we get the hot, dry stretches that are being forecast with the forecasted El Niño pattern.

A bit of attention now pays off all summer. Healthy, well-pruned roses are more resilient and far more rewarding when bloom time arrives.

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