# Pruning Basics

By Bill Kozemchak

In the Mid-Atlantic area the rule of thumb is to prune when the forsythia bloom. Many new growers are nervous when it comes to pruning. Unless you prune your roses to the ground in the fall, you shouldn't have a problem. The canes will hold nutrients for spring growth, so pruning in the fall should be limited to dead, damaged, or diseased canes. I will prune any overly tall canes so the bush will not rock in the cold winter winds, opening the ground around the bud union. This can kill the bush in a cold winter. Usually this is around 3.5 to 4 foot high. Other people have good luck with tying all the canes together so there is less for the wind to catch. The bushes can be pruned low or very high. Low pruning (8-12 inches) will produce less, but larger flowers. This is how many exhibitors prune. Higher pruning or just shaping the bush will produce smaller, but more numerous blooms. It is a matter of preference as to what you want from your garden. You could also prune somewhere in between the two extremes. No matter which way you choose, the bushes will still grow.

I have also heard from other rosarians, "the older I get the higher I prune", as it gets harder get down near the ground. The Fiskars pruning stick is very useful for people who have a hard time bending or kneeing down. It is very light and has a swivel head so it can be used to reach high or low, eliminating the need to bend down or step up on a stool or ladder.

Clean sharp pruning shears, loppers, and pruning saw are important so you don't damage the canes as you prune. Also use the proper tool for size cane you are cutting. Some people will try to muscle the cane with the wrong tool and end up with a very dull or broken tool. If the cane is too large for pruners, get your loppers, if the loppers aren't working get the pruning saw. It is easier and cheaper than replacing the broken tool. Trust me, I know firsthand.

Cut the canes back to healthy tissue. The center or pith should be white and healthy, not brown. Some varieties may not be very white, but they also shouldn't be too brown. Last year I left some questionable canes higher than I should and once the heat came in June the canes ended up dying, wasting the energy the bush had put out to grow that new cane. Had I pruned lower the canes would still have been on the bush. If you find canes that are dead or diseased, you may have to remove them completely. Canes that are damaged or split should be removed below the damaged portion. It is also good to open the center of the bush to allow air to circulate, helping with disease and fungus problems. Small, twiggy, and unproductive growth should also be removed.

If you don't grow a very large number of roses, many people will seal the ends of the canes with Elmers glue (not the school glue), nail polish or shellac. This will stop cane borers from tunneling into the freshly cut soft canes. They can do quite a bit of damage when they tunnel way down into the cane, sometimes down to the bud union.

After pruning I usually apply a fresh layer of mulch. Mulching now will prevent breaking off new soft growth later on. It is also easier than working around bushes that have already leafed out.