



January in the Garden

By **Russell Jordan**



As Christmas quickly fades into memory, the New Year gets underway with lots of well meant, but seldom kept, intentions to ‘do better’; getting out into the garden is unlikely to be your first priority. As I’ve already touched upon recently, the winter is a good time to assess the ‘bare bones’ of the garden now that everything deciduous has shed its leaves and all the herbaceous plants have died down. If it’s too cold or wet to go outside, then planning for the year ahead from the comfort of your favourite armchair may be a good use of your time. Ordering seeds, summer bulbs and bare-rooted specimens is a timely task which is easier to do once you’ve assessed what opportunities for improved planting your garden possesses.

One stalwart of the ‘English Garden’ is the good old rose, and there’s still time to choose them from catalogues, either printed or online, and order bare-rooted roses for planting before spring arrives. Additionally, when it comes to roses that you already have in the garden, there is constant debate on the best time to prune them; I find that autumn pruning can be too early as roses are barely dormant until it gets really cold.

Having said that, this year, with freezing temperatures and actual snow in November, they certainly were stopped in their tracks well before Christmas. With that in mind, now is a good time to get on and do your rose pruning, as leaving it until much later can leave open wounds, with sap rising, which could potentially allow pathogens to infect cut stems. Best to prune them now while they are in their deepest winter sleep and impervious to the vicious cuts which you are about to subject them to.

In theory there are different sets of rules to apply to each type of rose that you are tackling; be it a shrub rose, ‘Hybrid Tea’, rambler, climber, ground-cover etc. The rose breeder ‘David Austin’ has cornered the market in what they call ‘English Roses’

and these have some of the attributes that are most sought after in roses designed for garden use i.e. a shrub like shape, repeat flowering, disease resistance and classic rose flowers often with a good scent. There are plenty of other rose breeders out there, whose roses also merit consideration, especially if you favour some of the older varieties or speciality roses such as those bred for ground cover.

Back to the actual pruning; with any rose the pruning checklist is to start with removing any dead wood, diseased wood and spindly, non-vigorous, shoots. Dead wood is easy to identify because it is brown, diseased wood is generally brown or yellow, with a mottled appearance, while healthy wood is green, although many roses have a distinct purplish tinge about them.

Once the dead and dying stems have been cleared out then the oldest stems are next for pruning out. These are harder to spot, until you’ve got your eye in, but they tend to be darker coloured and thicker than the younger stems. There are, naturally, more old stems towards the base of the plant than at its top. The oldest, often thickest, stems may be too tough to be excised using secateurs and are best cut using loppers, if there is room to get the blades in, or with a narrow pruning saw where access is really difficult.

Before severing the old wood, have a look along its length to make sure that it isn’t carrying new, vigorous, shoots further up which you need to keep. The aim should always be to remove all the oldest wood, whilst keeping the youngest, to leave a balance of the different ages when you have finished pruning.

Another aim is to keep the centre as open as possible with no crossing branches. That is the ‘ideal’, in fact it’s very difficult to have no crossing branches. Cutting stems so that you always leave an outward facing bud, on the bit that remains, is another laudable, but not always possible, aim. Don’t

get hung up on these finer points of pruning, just be aware that they are 'best practice'.

If you've removed all the obvious stems, falling into the categories so far, then you should have shifted the balance towards healthy new growth. On a shrub type rose, shortening everything back is fine and the more brutal you are, the more it tends to bounce back.

On a rose with long, arching stems the temptation is to decapitate each 'unruly' growth. Resist this temptation as shortening the long, new, shoots would destroy the plant's grace and flowering potential. Better to construct some sort of frame around them, up to about a third or half of their total height, using tree stakes and hoops of wire which the long stems can be arched over and tied onto. The overall effect is to produce a 'fountain' of growth. Many of the 'English Roses' have a habit of producing these fairly long shoots and can, in fact, be treated more like small climbing roses than as strict shrub roses.

Working around the bush, you should end up with all the new growth kept intact, and under control, thanks to the supporting structure. It's a relatively simple task, in subsequent years, to remove the oldest stems and tie in the newest ones – thanks to the framework which you have imposed on them.

As with climbing roses, trained on a wall or fence, the point of arching them over is to encourage every bud, on the top of the curved stem, to produce a flowering shoot hence realising its full potential.

Once pruned it is a good idea to mulch around the roses with a good, thick, layer of organic matter such as well-rotted horse manure. I find it easiest to buy this as a bagged product because commercially produced organic mulches are certain to be sterile and weed free, as they are rotted down at higher temperatures, and it is their ability to suppress weed growth, in addition to improving the soil structure, which is important to me.

While you are applying organic mulches to clear soil it's worth paying special attention to those areas where spring bulbs are emerging. Clearing away old leaves and detritus whilst carefully working in your chosen mulch, around the emerging bulbs, will allow their flowers to be perfectly set off against the dark background of the fresh organic matter. Snowdrops and their ilk may already be in flower but drifts of early narcissi and the soon to emerge tulips will really look their best if you take the time to remove anything that might otherwise detract from their beauty.

Happy New Year!

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