

Deadheading

Can't you just picture them—tie-dyed shirts, bell bottom pants, love beads, Birkenstocks—moving slowly through the rose garden, snipping off dying rose blooms as Jerry Garcia leads the band into another frenzied "golden oldie." WRONG! That's not what we mean by the term "deadheading.!" Members of the Grateful Dead do occasionally participate in this pastime, but what we want to explain is the art and practice of removing "spent" blooms (used up, finished, over-the-hill, faded), from the bush so it will set new buds and continue to bloom in regular cycles.

Deadheading means to cut off the old blooms that are finished so the plant will set new buds on new canes and continue to bloom. It only works on roses that actually do bloom several times in a season. You could deadhead Madame Hardy or most of the other Old Garden Roses, and rouse not a trace of interest in blooming again. This only works on "recurrent" bloomers—those roses that bloom several times during the year. It seems like they think they have done their job if the bloom is left on the bush and it goes to seed. So, to let the plant "know" it has to try again, with a new bloom, we cut off the old one when it is finished.

"Finished" can have many different meanings. Some rosarians cut off the old blooms the moment they begin to fade, others wait until they begin to wilt, some even procrastinate until the bloom drops its petals and starts forming a "hip" or seed pod! Whatever time schedule you use, the rose will require 4 to 6 weeks before it opens another bud into the bloom stage (depending on the variety of rose).

How you cut the spent blooms will determine the quality versus the quantity of your blooms for the season. If you cut "high" you will get more blooms, but generally smaller with smaller stems. If you cut "low" you will get more robust stems and larger but fewer blooms. Your own particular style will determine the outcome of your deadheading program.

Rosarians who cut "high" recommend following the stem of the dying bloom DOWN until you come to a good set of leaves with 5 leaflets. Cut just above the leaf on the outside of the cane, and the new stem with its new bud will start from there and "lean" out from the center of the bush. This often (not always!) results in many, many blooms on the bush, with small, short stems.

Rosarians who cut "low" recommend starting at the BASE of the bush, and counting UP the stem 4 or 5 pairs of leaves (the 5 leaflet kind), then cutting the stem just above the outward facing leaf. This will start a new stem which is large and strong and will give a healthy, large bloom. After this new bloom has finished, you would cut BELOW your previous cut (below the "hook") so you eventually use up all 5 of the good bud eyes you left on the stem.

Of course, there is always the middle ground. Start from the bottom and go up the stem. Cut a few times. If the new cane is good and thick, you can cut higher on it and go back to the old cane later in the season! Personal preference coupled with observed results should be your guide here. In other words, "what works for you!"

Deadheading is necessary to convince the bush to continue to produce flowers. Interestingly, Grandma just walked along and snapped off the old rose blooms with her fingers. She did the same thing to her chrysanthemums, snap dragons, asters, marigolds, and any other plant she encountered in her garden. And you know what?

Grandma's way worked too!!!