

DEADHEADING: A New Look At A Familiar Task

-- Frances G. Ballentine

One of the best secrets in rosedom concerns deadheading roses. The exhibitors have known about it for years and years, but it hasn't been reported in the "rose press" until recently. I should have picked up on this secret years ago, as I toured exhibitors gardens and asked questions about this or that. I saw it, understood it, and yet my head never got the message.

Traditional Wisdom

As Rosarians, we are advised to "deadhead" regularly – that is, remove the spent blossoms just above the first five-leaflet leaf. Occasionally, we find a reference that advises removing the spent blossoms at a three-leaflet leaf, after the first spring flush – the reason being to conserve foliage needed by the plant for photosynthesis.

Deviations Observed

From time to time, I have observed several fellow South Carolina rose growers – all respected rosarians – departing from the traditional deadheading technique.

I remember visiting Dr. Satish Prabhu's wonderful Columbia, South Carolina, garden in 1993, and noting that he removed the spent blossoms at the peduncle – way above the foliage of the stem! An exhibitor's trick, I thought.

Some time later, I saw the same kind of deadheading in the Augusta, South Carolina, garden of Paul Blankenship, who explained that retention of all possible foliage would make the plants stronger, blooms larger, etc. and showing me the bud eye from which the new growth would probably emerge. He also recommended removing buds as soon as they become visible, to further direct the plant's energy into growth.

I then noticed that Mary Beth Martin, of Cross, South Carolina, deadheaded way up the stem, right below the bloom, and Frances Nixon of Charleston, South Carolina, removed the spent blooms of her Old Garden Roses right at the neck.

In Print

Nothing I saw in rose-related literature and publications pointed to changing from the traditional "make a slanting cut, 1/4-inch above an outward-facing five-leaf set." Nothing, that is, until Sean McCann's feature: "***There Is A Rose For Everyone***," in "***American Rose***," May, 1999. Here, this internationally-recognized rose-grower commented, "*When you are deadheading your roses, do you cut down to the first set of five leaflets? The current advice from experimental gardens in the RNRS (Royal National Rose Society) headquarters, at St. Albans, is to nip off the dead flower just at the neck. That will promote immediate growth, and a quicker return to flowering. The only sufferers in this will be the exhibitors, who will go their own way anyway. After all, if you can't believe yourself, who can you believe.*"

Next, I read an article on the Carolina District Web Site, where Robbie Tucker, well-known hybridizer, exhibitor, and editor, from Nashville, TN, shared a personal experience and "*a simple little rose-growing tidbit.*" He reported that a 1998 late spring freeze had killed or permanently damaged many of the rosebushes in his area, with most Hybrid Teas needing to be pruned back to the bud unions. Just four to six weeks later, as the bushes were recovering nicely, a devastating hailstorm beat

“the ever-loving heck out of the tender new growth” on their bushes. According to Tucker, “The consensus seemed (to be) to write off the spring rose show season, and concentrate on getting our bushes ready for the fall. No roses were cut through July. All blooms were snapped off at the peduncle when the cycle was completed, leaving the maximum amount of foliage remaining on the plant.” By July, the bushes were almost as large as they were the preceding year, according to Tucker.

Questioning Traditional Practices: One Consulting Rosarian’s Thoughts

These observations and printed pieces led me to ask: “Is it time to question the traditional way of deadheading roses?” Perhaps! I sought the counsel of **ARS Consulting Rosarian Dr. Satish Prabhu**, by who’s advice and thoughts on difficult subjects I have been guided over the years. **Dr. Prabhu stated:**

*“**Long before** I ever became a member of the ARS, and had the opportunity to read all the nice literature, particularly on how to prune back to the first five-leafed leaflet after blooming, I used to remove only the spent blooms for several reasons:*

Most cut flowers sold in the market, in India, had not foliage at all. It was therefore common to just cut the blooms without any foliage attached.

I wanted my newly-planted bushes to look FULL, rather than well-groomed and sparse.

I also noted that the bushes that received ‘flower only’ deadheading produced more basal breaks earlier than the bushes that received the five-leaflet deadheading and removal of blind growth.

*“**Later, when I** became a member of the ARS, I read Howard Walter’s advice in “American Rose” magazine: ‘Grow good foliage and good roses will follow.’ And Dr. John Dickman’s ‘All the fertilizers in the soil won’t do any good without a good compliment of foliage because it is only through photosynthesis that the bushes can manufacture food.’*

*“**When my garden** in Columbia became too large for me to do a meticulous job of thinning out the crowded centers and cutting back to five leaflets, I continued this practice on a few select bushes, but the rest of the garden received the ‘just remove the flower’ treatment, Again, the plants that were treated the latter way produced more basal breaks faster. I tried to share this observation with my rosarian friends, but before my exhibiting days, this information was largely ignored. Another observation I have made is that when I prune for fall shows, the winning entries come more often on new growth that starts somewhere lower on the bush than where the canes were pruned. This further bolstered my observation that pruning to a five-leaflet leaf is entirely **unnecessary!***

*“**What about the** clearing of centers and removing blind shoots so as to allow the spray material to reach all the foliage? With modern sprayers, this is rarely a problem. I do have several large bushes, each more than 5 ft. in diameter, and densely foliated. On such bushes, removing blind shoots makes sense. But this is not a common problem for most rosarians.*

*“**Otherwise, do I** sometimes remove some of the excess foliage? I remove excess foliage only when I see a promising shoot trying to emerge from the thicket of foliage. I clear the way, so to speak, and in doing so, I simply remove the foliage obstructing its straight path, blind shoots or not. Otherwise, the new shoot will end up without any good foliage on the lowest part, which was denied sunlight while it was forming foliage.*

*“**With this exception,** I try to conserve all the foliage I can. The leaves on blind shoots and twiggy growth will all make significant contributions through photosynthesis. Conservation of all foliage is extremely important in the spring, on those bushes that are winter-damaged. I like to retain even partially dead canes, if they bear a few leaves, though they eventually will die completely, necessitating later removal. But in the crucial part of early spring, those bad-looking canes will have enough foliage*

to make a difference in the bush's recovery.

Again, my observation is that bushes treated thus recover faster by producing more healthy canes and basal breaks than the bushes pruned clean of all partially damaged canes.” (Dr. Satish Prabhu)

CONCLUSIONS:

Based on these observations from some of the most respected rosarians in this country and abroad . . .

I believe the time has come to re-assess some of our deadheading teaching practices. **These include:**

Maximum conservation of foliage will result in more healthy canes, basal breaks, and better blooms.

Pruning to a five-leaflet leaf is not always necessary. The “just remove the flower, and leave all the foliage” treatment produces more basal breaks and faster, healthy re-growth than does traditional deadheading.

Conservation of all foliage is extremely important, and includes the leaves on blind shoots and twiggy growth. All make significant contributions through photosynthesis, and should be retained unless they interfere with the growth of healthy new canes.

These recommendations are especially important when pruning winter-damaged bushes, deadheading after the first spring flush, and rejuvenating plants which have summered other damage.

This article is an ARS Award of Merit winner, which has previously appeared in the “Charleston Rose,” (Newsletter of the Charleston Low Country Rose Society), the “Voice Of The Rose,” (Newsletter of the Rose Society of Greater St. Louis, and the “American Rose” Magazine.