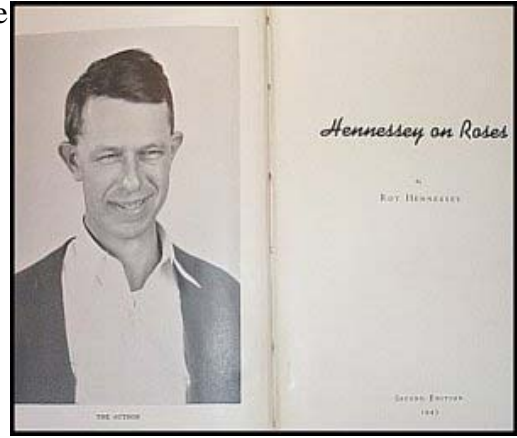


Hennessey Revisited

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In England he would have been revered as an esteemed eccentric. In the United States a half century ago he was regarded as either a single-minded crank or an unappreciated guru of roses. He published his own book rather than submit the manuscript to a committee of experts of the American Rose Society; it ran to three editions in twelve years. And he despised academics, rose experts, everyone who looked abroad for guidance in matters rosarian and those who abused his bare root roses by cutting them. In fact, he made his purchasers promise not to cut the roots of his roses as a condition of sale.



The 'he' in question is Roy Hennessey, a rose grower in the middle of the 20th century in a place called Scappoose, Oregon, about twenty miles outside the city of Portland. He seems also to have been an anti-tax crusader of some single-mindedness. Although he published essays and articles, he is primarily known now as the author OF HENNESSEY ON ROSES. In it he distilled and justified his beliefs about roses in prose sufficiently dense to require his wife to chase him about the property demanding that he explain further, give examples, and make the prose accessible to the average reader. For this reason he dedicated the book to her on behalf of 'the readers of the book.'

There are no citations in Hennessey's book because he believed that all the authority necessary for validation of his ideas was to be found in the excellence of the roses he grew and sold. Nor did he keep notes until it was time to write the book first printed and bound in 1942 by the West Coast Printing and Binding Company of Portland, Oregon. The cost: \$3.50. If you were to check www.Addall.com for comparison price shopping, a dozen books will range in price from about \$12 to \$24. Fair copies can be found in many used bookstores for about \$5.

Hennessey was capable of clear, even vulgar prose; Ralph Moore recalls that letters from Hennessey were generally 'smoking.' Paula Ballin remembers that roses purchased from the nursery were covered with admonitions such as "DO NOT PRUNE THE ROOTS" as well as messages extending from the front to the sides to the borders of invoices and postcards. Peter Schneider in his Burpee Expert Gardener series on roses notes that Hennessey was responsible for the growth of good roses as well as considerable backache on the part of rose enthusiasts with his injunctions against cutting bare root roses. At times the plants sent by Hennessey had roots extending 3-1/2 to 4 feet long. Hennessey's rationale for long roots was that the plant produced the root system consistent with its needs; otherwise, it would be wasting energy. Sufficiently long roots preserved and properly planted would ensure significant growth the very first year in the ground, rather than waiting for development to ensue some time thereafter. The penchant for cutting roots he attributed to cost-cutting nurseries and convenience seeking gardeners.

Current instruction on planting bare root roses does not accord with Hennessey's concern about not pruning the roots. Amanda Beales in *Rose Basics* (1999) suggests 'trimming any damaged or exceptionally long roots to the average length of the others' (p 52). Lance Walheim in *Roses for Dummies* (1997) advises cutting off any 'broken or mushy roots.' And while he does not advocate

cutting roots just to shorten them, he does indicate that 'removing an inch or so stimulates new growth' (p 205). Probably the antithesis of Hennessey's viewpoint would be found in the cardboard containers pioneered by Jackson and Perkins a few years ago.

Of course, even Hennessey's contemporaries did not argue for the wholesale elimination of the root system; the executive director of the American Rose Society, R.C. Allen argued in *Roses for Every Garden* (1948) that holes should be dug to fit roots rather than the reverse (p. 80), while noting that most roots will not need pruning any more than the digging process in the original nursery provided. Allen even italicized his advice that if the roots do not fit in the hole without bending or twisting, the proper remedy was to make the hole larger.

Nor was Hennessey an advocate of full sun for roses. He argued that most rose writings originated in England where there was a "decided dearth of sunshine and where full sun is not too 'full' at that" (p 96). He believed that the background of both foetida and tea roses in the modern hybrid teas necessitated either partial shade or dappled shade in order to demonstrate the most striking of color components, but also in order to prevent the plant from shutting down in the deadly heat of high summer. While most current books for beginners take note of the variable circumstances in the United States for growing roses and others finesse the question of 'full sun for roses,' few have chapters entitled *The Shady Rose Garden* as does Hennessey.

Hennessey's greatest contempt was reserved for those who 'whacked' roses at pruning time; only partially tongue in cheek did he recommend that a "few first class goats be hired rather than pruning shears in the hands of some professionals" (p 62). He believed that the practice of whacking a rose to the ground arose from the once prevalent European varieties that suckered a great deal and thus needed whacking in order to focus the energy of the plant into bloom rather than expansion. Modern hybrid teas contained sufficient tea rose influence to resent whacking and were provided with insufficient root areas to sustain strong development. Thus the recommendations to root prune at planting time reduced the amount of food available to the rose bush as well as providing entrance points for bacteria and other organisms harmful to the bush. Hennessey deplored the recommendation to prune low to 2 or 3 inches of cane because it depleted the ability of the rose to produce leaves to provide starch for the vigorous growth of the bush.

He recommended that the rose grower become familiar with the particular rose and to prune according to its natural structure and growth pattern; in passing he stated that few rose bushes produce one bud to a stem once the natural vigor of the plant had been established.

Few modern writers agree with Hennessey in this regard. Walheim justifies pruning on the basis of improving flowering, maintaining the health of the plant, to direct growth and to keep the rose bush within decent boundaries. He especially recommends that hybrid teas be more heavily pruned in order to produce fewer but more spectacular blooms (p 232). Beales recommends pruning first year plants back to three or four bud eyes and regular pruning back to about half the length of thick canes and a greater percentage for thin canes. On the other hand the studies from various sources indicate that rough pruning with hedge clippers will produce floriferous plants although the need to remove twiggish and weak growth will remain.

Perhaps the world of rosaria has caught up with Hennessey four decades after his 1962 death. Or perhaps not. Only a few of the score of roses he bred or introduced in his long career remain in commerce; a Google search delivers only a few references to his book; only a few aficionados of the rose remember him. But perhaps the real message in Hennessey on *Roses* is his insistence that rose growers become thoroughly and intimately acquainted with their roses before making pronouncements,

judgments, or irrevocable decisions. In fact the last page of his book argues against drawing any conclusions whatsoever about a rose on the basis of one year's experience with one or two bushes. In the long struggle to establish whether roses exist for man or man for the rose, Hennessey ultimately plumps for the latter. For him it is indefensible to sacrifice a rose for the ego of an amateur grower or professional 'whacker.' HENNESSEY ON ROSES could just as well have been titled HENNESSEY FOR ROSES.