

Q. I have an old David Austin rose that has been ignored for years. How can I rehabilitate this plant?

A. Davis Austin roses resemble old fashioned roses, but they are relatively new hybrids with rather extensive parentage. They are best known for their wonderful fragrance.

Many books and article have been written about pruning roses, however your basic goal is to produce a plant that flowers freely, producing good quality blooms with good airflow and disease resistance. Begin by sharpening your pruners and a decent pair of loppers, and getting a sturdy pair of long gloves and a heavy long-sleeved shirt. Remove any canes that are dead, brown and brittle. If you see green when you cut into a cane, it is not dead. This is easier written than done when talking about an older, ignored rose, which can become quite a bramble hedge. You also want to remove canes that are crossing and rubbing against each other. Davis Austin roses have different growth habits, which creates difficulties when making recommendations. If this is a bushy rose, remove 1/3 of each stem to an outside facing bud. It may be easier to remove the dead wood back to the main stem at this time. Remove any weak or spindly growth. Do not be afraid of over-pruning.

Renovation pruning requires cutting the stems down to 18” in height and starting afresh with new growth in the spring. The advantage of this kind of pruning is that it takes much less time since few judgment calls need to be made, and it removes many of the disease organisms wintering over in the wood. Davis Austin roses are susceptible to rusts, powdery mildews and insect damage. Clean up all prunings and discard. They can be chopped up into small pieces and composted IF you have a very hot compost pile that is turned regularly. If you don not turn your compost at least twice a week, it is not a ‘hot’ pile.

Once rain stops, fertilize the rose with finished compost and cover with 3-4” of fine mulch. If you have access to coffee ground, a ½” layer around the crowns of the plant will provide nitrogen and a little acidification. Roses are heavy feeders, and should get fed on a regular basis. If you are looking for slow-release nitrogen options, consider using Alfalfa Meal. David Austin roses were bred for a British climate with regular summer water. Make sure the plant is watered deeply once a week during the dry months. These roses require regular dead-heading (removing the faded flowers), which encourages new growth and repeat blooming through the fall. These are lovely plants, and well worth the effort.