

Rethinking Deadheading

— Anita Clevenger

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As we've pruned this winter, we've been noticing strong canes that have been abruptly cut off at mid-point. Instead of becoming major structural elements, those canes are awkward stubs.

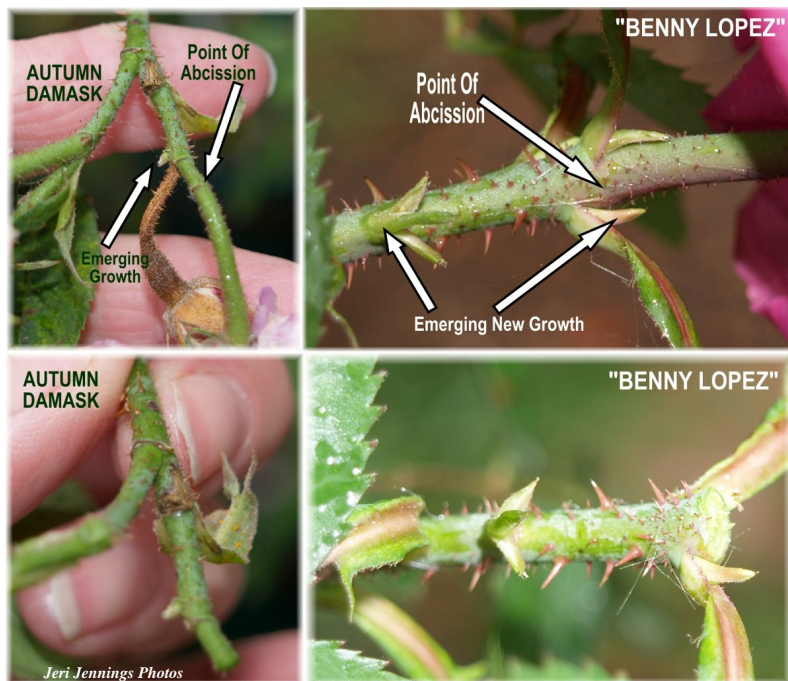
The more vigorous types, especially Teas, Chinas, Noisettes, and Polyanthas, respond by frantically generating growth from buds below the cut. The new canes are less strong, and may be weakly attached. They head out at awkward angles, sometimes snaking across the center of the plant. New growth often looks like spokes on a wheel, or a thicken known as "witches broom." Whatever you choose to call it, the results are ugly.

At first, we suspected phantom pruners who were sneaking into the cemetery and chopping off the canes while no one was looking. Then, we realized that we had met the enemy, and it was us. Barbara said it first. "Do you suppose," she ventured, "the problem is deadheading?"

Well, yes. That is indeed the problem on many of these roses. Last year, we deadheaded more than usual, even to the extent of having deadheading parties during the summer months. As Conventional Wisdom dictates, we've cut to the first outward-facing five-leaflet bud. That's reasonably good advice for modern roses, but for out older varieties in the cemetery, it's way too far down the cane.

WHY?

Why do we deadhead, anyway? It's conventional wisdom, once again, that says that we need to deadhead to encourage another bloom cycle. Setting hips, it is said, will cause the plant to think that it's produced enough seed, so that it doesn't need to bloom anymore. On some roses, that's true. But we've all seen new growth sprout just below the flower clusters on many of the older roses, whether or not they've been deadheaded. Some of these roses don't develop fertile hips, and others are simply blooming fools, and will keep on pumping



“Bend & Snap” Deadheading At The Abcission Point, Demonstrated on Autumn Damask, and on a Found Damask Perpetual, “Benny Lopez”

out flowers even if seed-bearing hips have been produced.

Of course, once-blooming roses won't flower again, no matter whether the spent flowers or hips are removed or not. So, deadheading is “necessary” for rebloom only on certain types of roses, or to remove spent flowers or hips we consider unsightly.

At the gathering of rosarians at Ralph Moore's 100th birthday party, I cornered a few of the most knowledgeable and asked their advice. They all suggested that we deadhead by just snapping off the spent flower or newly forming hip. There's a point at which flower stalks readily separate from the plant, known as the “abscission point.”

I had expected that the rosarians would suggest only doing this for Teas, Chinas, and similar roses. To my surprise, they said this would work for all types of roses, even Hybrid Perpetuals and Hybrid Teas. Ron Robertson of Garden Valley Ranch, said that we should just **“bend and snap,”** borrowing a phrase from the movie *“Legally Blonde.”*

Growth buds are right below the abscission point, he says, and the rose will continue to grow and bloom.

We are still going to deadhead our roses this year, but without pruning shears in hand. We're going to ask volunteers to “bend and snap,” and evaluate how well the roses respond. When we do need to shorten a cane, we will try to remove it altogether (a “*thinning*” cut) rather than lopping it in the middle (a “*heading*” cut). After all there is no reason to shorten most of the cemetery roses, or to reduce their width, unless they are blocking the path or covering a monument.

—A.C., 2007

Rosarian and Master-Gardener Anita Clevenger is a vital force in the crew that tends and expands the Historic Rose Garden within the Sacramento City Cemetery.

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