



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

David Austin: An Appreciation.

My last column highlighted some plant breeders who made significant changes and contributions in fruit trees and roses. Then we got the word that David Austin, one of those breeders, died peacefully in his sleep on December 18 at his home in Shropshire, England, at the age of 92.¹

Over six decades, Austin created an entire new class of roses. The English roses, commonly called the David Austin roses, combine the fragrance and flower form of old heirloom roses with the color range and better growth habit of modern hybrids.

But his work also reflected a change that occurred gradually in the 20th century in our attitudes about roses: the rose as a garden plant, not just as a pampered producer of long-stemmed cut flowers.

The company's catalogue, the Handbook of Roses 2019, arrived in the mail just last week. It shows roses spilling out of urns and planters, scrambling over rock walls, trailing along fences, trained up around doorways, mixed in among ornamental grasses and perennials. There are chickens and grass paths and statues and cottage rooflines. Rather than the picture-perfect mug shots typical of other rose catalogues, they show the plants themselves with abundant clusters of blooms and highlight how they grow.

I always had the sense that David Austin was a rose-loving gardener first, and then a rose breeder. For someone who found his inspiration in 19th century roses, he was remarkably forward-looking in his marketing and breeding programs.

“David Austin has spent the last sixty years developing his award-winning English Roses. ... As a group they are renowned for their outstanding health, reliability and vigor. Their graceful, shrubby habits make them ideal for mixed borders, planting in large containers or for creating any kind of rose garden. Many varieties can also be trained as climbers or used to create fragrant, floriferous hedges.”²

In short, he showed how we use roses as gardeners, not just how flower arrangers might use them.

And that may be what saves the rose industry from itself.

Too fussy?

The story of roses in the 20th century is the story of the Hybrid Tea rose, with its perfect overlapping petals, high-centered buds, and long stems for cutting. But ask a hundred people what they like about roses, it's really a small percentage of them that will tell you they want to grow them to put in vases. They want fragrance, and attractive plants, and lots of flowers all season, and they don't want to fuss to get those things.

Hybrid Tea roses are beautiful, but their reign may finally have passed. By the 1990's, sales of rose bushes were dropping steadily. The recession drove some rose growers into and near to

¹ <https://www.prnewswire.co.uk/news-releases/david-c-h-austin-obe-vmh-1926-2018--880763500.html>

² <https://www.davidaustinroses.com/us/roses-by-type/english-roses>



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bankruptcy. Modern gardeners aren't interested in spraying. They're turned off by the detailed care instructions that had attached themselves to rose culture, the checklists of emphatic do's and don'ts and the complicated rotations of fungicides that were presented as essential to rose care.

In effect, rose experts had conditioned the public to expect perfection in roses. The marketing of roses and rose care products invariably featured studio portraits of individual blossoms, each petal without a blemish. Even as landscape and shrub roses crept into the marketplace, relegated to the back pages of wholesale and mail order catalogues, they usually showed close-ups of the flowers – failing to portray the way consumers would use and appreciate these plants as garden shrubs.

So as each new generation came along and perceived them to require lots of effort, roses became about as relevant and trendy as Lawrence Welk. Something your grandma liked, of which you had fond memories, but that weren't part of your lifestyle. Like a lot of other 'big' flowers, such as dahlias, camellias, gladiolus, and hydrangeas, they fell out of favor.

Here's a typical passage about rose care: "Fashionable continental roses are notoriously difficult to care for without the use of pesticides, which makes them essentially ungrowable to gardeners who want to use organic methods."³

Well, that may be true where it rains in the summer, for many types of roses. But we live in the arid west. The enemies of fungus are sunshine and wind, of which we have plenty. You can grow roses without spraying them at all here. But most people came to believe otherwise.

The reality

The funny thing is, if you walk through almost any cemetery or poke around old farmhouses, you'll see big sprawling rose bushes blooming away without any attention. Some of the leaves may have fungus on them, but often not. Nobody is spraying them. Any pruning is likely with hedge shears. The plants look very pretty, many types are quite fragrant, and the flowers are great. Not perfect, not unblemished, but well worth growing.

Throw out the rules?

I just went through several online articles about 'how to prune roses' and found they range from misguided to insufferable.

One example: "By far the most important technique to master in pruning roses is the correct angle and direction of the primary cut. The final pruning cut should be made at approximately a 45-degree angle, about 1/4" above a leaf axle where there is a dormant eye."

Oh, pish. Show me the evidence that any of that matters.

Let's get rid of the notion that you 'must' prune roses in a specially prescribed manner.

My grandfather was a serious rose fancier. He cut his bushes to 42 inches height (he was rather precise about things). The result was big vigorous shrubs that produced roses right at my grandmother's eye level.

³ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/05/18/british-gardens-no-longer-bed-roses/>



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My neighbors down the street, equally serious about their roses, cut theirs back to 16 inches high. The result: shorter bushes whose first flush of blooms in spring had great long stems and extra-large flowers, though fewer than my grandfather got on his first flush of bloom.

Lesson learned: it really doesn't matter how hard you cut back your roses. It's your choice based on your preferred outcome.

What about all of the careful cane selection, and thinning, and cutting to outward-pointing buds, and cutting at prescribed 45-degree angles?

Don't worry if you're not acquainted with all of that. It certainly leads to nice, open-centered bushes with balanced growth, long stems, etc., but it isn't essential. In fact, you can prune your roses much more informally if you wish.

In 1992, Ken Grapes, then-President of the Royal National Rose Society, UK, caused a stir with an article (reprinted in *The American Rose*, August 1992) which described trials underway at their St. Albans rose gardens of three different pruning techniques.

- The Traditional Pruning Method (in the UK they capitalize Important Things) was done as I described above ("careful cane selection, etc.").
- In the Rough Pruning Method, rose bushes were simply cut back by about half. No concern was given to where the cuts were made, they were just horizontal, and the bushes were pruned to roughly the same height in each bed.

In both of these methods, all dead wood was removed.

- For the Hedgetrimmer Pruning Method, they were cut in half with hedge shears. "The hedgetrimmer cuts were very ragged, leaving lots of snagged and ripped shoots."
I can only imagine the horror this caused. Even worse, "no dead wood was removed."

The results?

Those pruned by the Rough Pruning and Hedgetrimmer Pruning methods were more vigorous, with "stronger growth and an equally good or, in many cases, better flowering performance than traditional pruning."

What's that? You can just cut your roses in half, any old which way, and they'll be just as good, maybe even flower better?

I have often pruned roses with the rough pruning method, though not in a systematic comparison trial. I haven't tried hedge shears, though I note the city does that with landscape roses in median strips, such as the Bonica shrub roses in the center of the Pole Line overpass into South Davis.

The article cautioned not to draw quick conclusions, promising the trials would continue. And there the trail goes cold, as no further mention can be found of this pre-internet bit of heresy. Perhaps the cries of indignation and shattering of shibboleths caused them to abandon it. Alas, I fear we may never know, as the Society's gardens at St. Albans closed in 2017. Due to falling membership and revenues, the rose society went bankrupt (or, as they say there, "went into administration").

The expert advice.



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What does David Austin tell us about pruning? He keeps it simple.⁴

“The main purpose of pruning is to create a shapely, attractive shrub, with good structure. This process also encourages fresh new growth.”

Year One: prune lightly, just cutting back 3 to 5 inches.

Year Two: Cut back all stems by one-third. Both years, cut any that are extra-long to the same length as the others.

Year Three and thereafter: cut back by less than one-third, or by one-third, or by as much as half. Or more if you like. It just depends on how big you want your rose bush to be during the growing season. Want it smaller? Prune it harder.

Remember “the ‘four D’s’ – remove any dead, dying, damaged and diseased stems,” and pull off remaining foliage, if possible, to get rid of overwintering fungus spores.

And I note with satisfaction that mellowness comes with age and experience:

“Don’t worry about where you cut a stem. Accepted wisdom suggests cutting just above a leaf joint with a sloping cut away from the bud. However, there is no evidence to prove this is necessary.

Don’t worry about cutting back too much. Roses are extremely strong and will grow back even if you cut all of the stems right back to the base.”

“Every day, I marvel at my good fortune to have been able to make a life out of breeding roses.”
And we’re glad you did. RIP, David Austin.

⁴ <https://www.davidaustinroses.com/us/advice-and-inspiration/pruning-an-english-shrub-rose>



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_David%20Austin/David%20Austin%20Sr.%20on%20Bench%20with%20Bertie.JPG

David C. H. Austin Sr OBE VMH, rosarian and founder of David Austin Roses Ltd, with Bertie.
Photo courtesy of David Austin Roses.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_David%20Austin/Gertrude%20Jekyll%202.jpg

Introduced in 1986, David Austin's Gertrude Jekyll rose was named for a famous garden designer and author. Twice voted the UK's favorite rose, it has "quintessential Old Rose fragrance." Photo courtesy of David Austin Roses.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_David%20Austin/Rose%20Peace.jpg

The Peace rose is a very well-known Hybrid Tea rose showing the classic form sought by breeders of this class of roses. Cuttings were shipped out of France just before the German invasion, and the name was bestowed on it the day Berlin fell in 1945. The flowers, which open slowly, are great for cutting.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_David%20Austin/Rosa%20centifolia%20Napoleon's%20Hat.jpg

Napoleon's Hat, a rose from the early 19th century, was a variety of *Rosa centifolia* from 1845. Note the large number of petals, all packed together in the center of the bloom, typical of the heirloom roses that Austin used in his breeding. This variety also had novel 'mossing' of the sepals that were in the shape of a 3-cornered hat; hence the name. Extremely fragrant.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_David%20Austin/Rose%20Jacques%20Cartier%20damask.jpg

Jacques Cartier, a Portland rose from the 19th century. The Portland roses were natural hybrids of damask and china roses that re-bloomed and had great fragrance. Note the large number of petals, all packed together in the center of the bloom, typical of the heirloom roses that Austin used in his breeding.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_David%20Austin/Rose%20Pat%20Austin.jpg

Introduced by David Austin in 1995 and named for his wife, Pat Austin variety was an unusual color at the time, described as “bright copper.” The plant has a nice, compact growth habit with old-fashioned looking flowers.