

## THE MYTHS OF PRUNING

Most myths have a foundation in fact if we can find the connection and I believe that the pruning myths have such a foundation.

Let us look at some of these myths.

- Clear out the centre of the bush to let the air flow through and reduce the possibility of fungal diseases.
- Cut to an outward facing bud to shape the bush properly.
- Angle the cut above the bud so that the rain and snow do not stay on the cut and cause dieback.
- Remove old canes at the base of the plant as the bush can only maintain five canes.

Prior to the introduction of secateurs, gardeners used a pruning knife and a pruning saw with changeable blades. The knife has only one edge sharpened – the ‘up’ side and this was razor sharp, kept that way with a sharpening stone.

Told by the master of the mansion to go and do the pruning, the gardener would take his saw, fit on a chamois thumb guard, pick up his knife and go to the bush, “a tattered-looking complex of crossing and awkward stems, a confusing mass that is utterly incomprehensible.”



Our gardener picks up his saw and inserts the blade, with teeth, sawyers know as ‘pegs’. (Yes, that is where the expression “toothie-pegs” comes from.) When properly sharpened, this was a rapid cutting tool. For reasons which will become clear, he clears all the canes from the centre of the bush. Where there is little room, he replaces the blade to a very narrow, conventional tooth. One might say he has a blade for every situation. When his master asks him why he clears out the centre, he responds “To let the air flow through and reduce the possibility of fungal diseases”. All his fellow gardeners at the local, have agreed on this explanation.

The long term effect of removing the centre canes is that the centre of the bush dies and the canes concentrate around the dead centre of the bush. There are many examples of this treatment in our garden.

Now, with the centre clear, he can get his hands in there without doing too much damage to himself, ready for the next stage. He holds the cane to be shortened in his left hand and applies slight pressure outwards. He places his right thumb, protected by the chamois stall, on the outward facing bud. Why put your thumb on an inward facing bud – too hard to reach and too awkward. He tells his master that the outward facing bud is necessary to shape the bush properly. All his fellow gardeners have agreed to tell their masters this fable. The trouble with this is that the rose bush will decide which bud it will develop – not necessarily the outward facing one.



His knife is then sliced up to just above his thumb. It is too hard to slice straight across and the single sharpened edge of the knife will slide upwards. Even today with secateurs, it is easier to cut branches at an angle rather than straight across. He tells his master that he has an angle cut so that the rain and snow do not stay on the cut and cause die-back. Another tale they have agreed at the local. The left hand removes the cut-off and discards it. On to the next cane.



Also remember that it was always the right hand that did the cutting – there were no left-handed knives. That was the devil’s handiwork to be left handed. Our smart gardener also wants to save himself hard work, so he makes sure that no cane gets too old and hard for cutting by the knife by removing such canes at the base with the saw. Hence the myth from the local that the roots can only really support a maximum of five canes.

So, ‘Tradition’ allowed a practical application to remain in place when there was no longer any need for it, and it was supported by those who never questioned “Why?”

Just for fun, find an old knife, sharpen the ‘up’ side **ONLY**, put your thumb on a bud and try slicing. All the myths fall into place because it is the only practical way to accomplish the work. I’m glad I have a pair of secateurs.

The secateurs are a comparatively modern development. I am not sure when the first pair was marketed, but would guess late 1800s. They probably

originated from a smart gardener seeing the lady of the mansion cutting flowers for her dining room with a pair of scissors.

As you can see from the photo the earlier ones were really a modified pair of scissors, with scissor action on to a serrated edge and a 'hole' for larger canes. I find them exceptionally hard to use. This pair dates to about 1910. There were no loppers. They came much later.



Wal J May 2018