

# Cutting back perennials and pruning roses

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Last Sunday and Monday were perfect days to prune. In addition to pruning trees and shrubs, it's also time to cut back perennials, including roses.

If any of my perennials look good through the winter, I don't prune the foliage back to the ground in the fall. Plants with winter interest include ornamental grasses, some coneflowers, sedum, and daylilies.

I recommend that you cut any remaining foliage back as soon as you can; new growth is already starting on most perennials. It's much easier to cut the old foliage back now before new growth gets in the way.

I use my electric hedge trimmers to cut the dead foliage from all of my perennials. It's easy to use and makes the job much easier and it's quicker.

I don't recommend electric hedge trimmers for any other pruning task. If you pay attention to the cuts that hedge trimmers make, you'll see that they pretty much chew the tissue or wood.

It's ok to use this for dead foliage on perennials that overwintered. It's not good to use on fresh tissue such as leaves or branches.

Over the years I have refined my technique for cutting back my ornamental grasses. I used to tie them into a bundle with string and cut the entire bundle and take it to the compost pile.

Now, I cut a little bit at a time, maybe four to six inches, and let this debris fall to the ground. The clippings become mulch and as they break down over time, they provide organic matter for the soil.

I have started doing this with perennials that have narrow foliage such as daylilies and Siberian irises.

I don't "clean out" my perennial beds any more either. If the plants have gathered leaves, I don't rake them but rather allow them to decompose. I used to rake all of these leaves and put in the compost pile but that's just extra work.

I do clean out large twigs and branches and of course, the plastic cups and trash that people seem to need to toss out their windows into my garden – argh.

I have quite a few shrub roses and truthfully, these can be left alone and still look ok for this season. However, I like to clean them up a bit by taking out any dead branches and cutting the entire plant back to about six to eight inches from the ground.

This grows into a nice compact plant instead of a sprawling mess.

I start off with my electric hedge trimmers and cut them back to about 18". This makes them easier to navigate.

Then I go in by hand with my hand pruners or loppers (depending on the size of the branch) and cut out all of the older wood. I leave about six to eight good branches to become my new plant.

Remember when pruning roses always try to cut back to just above a bud that is facing out, away from the center of the plant. This keeps the plant from getting too much growth in the center.



Electric hedge trimmers are perfect for cutting back ornamental grasses



Roses can be cut back to around 8 – 12" from the ground