

Knock Out® Roses: Beauty and the Beast

By Susan Camp

After the long dry spells interspersed with brief torrential rains that we experienced this summer, several days of cooling, refreshing rain seemed like a gift from Mother Nature, but like all gifts, this one lost its fascination for me after about four days of being confined indoors. Even when the rain stopped, the garden was too wet and muddy for me to weed the jungle that appeared to grow up overnight. Instead, I decided to sort through and discard outdated files, where I found a question sent to me several years ago by a friend asking how and when to prune Knock Out® roses.

My recommendations included: Remove dead, damaged, or diseased canes any time of year. Cut Knock Out® roses back in late winter to early spring to about 12 inches tall. They are supposed to triple in height by the end of summer, so that by August or September they should be about 3 feet tall.

This is still good advice, but I find it interesting that most of the pruning and care articles on Knock Out® roses are published in popular gardening magazines or written by online bloggers. Some articles, I am sure, are well-researched, but I read several that contradicted the basic information. I always recommend science-based articles published by university Cooperative Extensions or highly renowned botanical gardens, but in the case of Knock Out® roses, such articles were sparse and difficult to locate.

NCState Extension Gardeners Plant Toolbox entry “Rosa Knock Out® Group” states that these hybrids require pruning primarily to keep the plant’s size in check. Knock Out® roses generally reach 3 to 4 feet in height with a comparable spread, but if left unpruned, can produce canes up to 8 feet long. If you are growing Knock Out® roses to create a privacy hedge, you can let them grow with minimal pruning, although you will want to remove unhealthy canes. You should also deadhead spent flowers to encourage prolific reblooming.

While some online articles mentioned cutting these roses back in late summer to early fall, other writers noted that late pruning can encourage new growth that won’t have sufficient time to harden off before the first frost.

Since I don’t grow Knock Out® roses, I wanted to find out what makes this particular hybrid shrub rose so special. If you have ever grown roses, you know that there are some frustrating issues involved in maintaining healthy plants that produce beautiful flowers. My personal nemesis is the Japanese beetle, but not far behind is black spot, a disease caused by the fungus, *Diplocarpon rosae*.

Black spot affects the upper surfaces of rose leaves, causing them to yellow and drop. Black spot isn't just unsightly; over time, the disease will weaken the plant's resistance to other diseases and stressors. See Missouri Botanical Garden article "Black Spot on Rose."

The original Knock Out® rose hybrid, the cherry red and hot pink 'Radrazz,' was bred to resist black spot and powdery mildew, another fungal disease, and provide an easily maintained rose shrub with a long reblooming period. Since 'Radrazz' appeared on the market in 2000, at least 12 other hybrids with flowers of various shades have joined the Knock Out® group. The shrubs remain popular today with their masses of colorful blooms and dark green foliage.

Knock Out® roses exploded in popularity for use as single accent plants or barriers and hedges in home gardens as well as at commercial sites. Closely planted shrubs in mass plantings contributed to a deadly problem. Knock Out® roses proved not to be resistant to the deadly and incurable rose rosette disease (RRD), a virus transmitted to roses by microscopic eriophyid mites, which spread the disease to nearby rose shrubs. Symptoms of RRD include elongated shoots with rubbery thorns, deformed leaves, buds, and flowers, and clusters of small branches called "witches' brooms." Infected shrubs must be destroyed. See Clemson Factsheet HGIC 2109 for more information on RRD.