



“Prune like a Pro!” 2021

Rosemary

TITLE: Pruning Rosemary

Description: Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) is a perennial shrubby evergreen in the Labiatae family that grows 4’ to 6’ tall and 3’ to 4’ wide. It can be grown as an annual or as a perennial.

Objective(s): Learn how to prune Rosemary so that you do not have to replace your plant every couple of years. Incorrect pruning can hasten a Rosemary plant’s demise.

WHAT: Rosemary can be grown in pots or in-ground. Most varieties grow best in well-drained, loamy, slightly acidic soil. Rosemary grows best in full sun and should receive at least 6 hours of sun each day. If you plan to use rosemary as a perennial plant, choose a site that will not be disturbed by tilling.

WHY: Rosemary shrubs benefit from light trimming throughout spring and summer to help maintain their shape and size. Frequent trimming also provides a steady harvest of rosemary to use in the kitchen.

WHEN: In late winter, cut out dead and winter-damaged branches and stems. In late spring, prune to control the size and shape.

WHERE: Rosemary is a hardy perennial in zones 7-10. Much of east TN is zone 7a, which means that a colder-than-usual winter can cause a lot of winter damage. The occasional polar vortex can kill the Rosemary plant.

HOW: Pruning Rosemary is not a one-and-done task. It should be pruned multiple times throughout the year to keep it looking its best:

1. Cut out dead and winter-damaged branches and stems in late winter, just before new growth begins on the stem tips. Cut back to the nearest healthy portion of the stem with sharp shears.
2. Trim back the entire plant by about one-third its height in late spring or early summer to control the size and shape of the rosemary. Make the cuts in the succulent green stem portions. Do not cut into the woody bottom section of each stem, because rosemary may not grow back well from the woody stem sections.
3. Remove overgrown stems anytime during the summer growing season to maintain the basic shape of the rosemary bush. Cut each overgrown stem back so it is the same length as surrounding stems.
4. Prune back overgrown rosemary in mid-to-late summer to maintain its shape and size if it begins to look unkempt. Remove up to half the new growth on the shrub, taking care not to cut into the woody portions of the stems.

Pruning and harvesting Rosemary can feel very similar. Both must be done gently, paying close attention to new buds forming on the plant.

- Harvest herbs by pinching or tipping at the nodes along a stem, leaving new growth to flourish for the next round.
- Harvesting by plucking individual leaves, or breaking off stems at random will interrupt growth patterns that the plant may not be able to recover.

SUMMARY OF IMPORTANT POINTS:

- The 4 D's (dead, diseased, damaged, dysfunctional) can be removed at any time.
- Like most other shrubs, you are pruning to increase airflow and sunshine, which will help to reduce plant diseases from taking hold.
- Make pruning cuts (other than 4 D's) in the succulent green portions of the stem.
- Use caution NOT to cut into the woody portion of a stem (unless it is one of the 4 D's).
- Remember that harvesting is different than pruning.
- The harder / colder the winter, the more pruning you will need to do in late winter.
- Stop pruning by Labor Day, as the Rosemary shrub needs 6-8 weeks for new growth to harden off prior to the first freeze or hard frost of winter.

Additional Resources / References:

September: Rosemary, UT Institute of Agriculture,
<https://ag.tennessee.edu/news/Pages/POM-2019-09.aspx>

Rosemary, Rosemarinus officinalis, University of Wisconsin Master Gardeners,
<https://mastergardener.extension.wisc.edu/article/rosemary-rosemarinus-officinalis/>

Herb Gardening Rosemary, University of Illinois Extension,
<https://web.extension.illinois.edu/herbs/rosemary.cfm>

Pruning Rosemary, Hand Pruning website, www.handpruning.com/pruning-rosemary.html

Pruning Rosemary, The Gardening Cook website,
<https://thegardeningcook.com/pruning-rosemary-prune-rosemary-plants/>

How to Prune Rosemary Plants, <https://homeguides.sfgate.com/prune-rosemary-plants-43060.html>

Knox County Master Gardeners website: www.knoxcountymastergardener.org

Knox County Master Gardeners Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/KnoxCountyMG>

Ask-a-Master Gardener / Knox County Extension Helpline: (865) 215-2340

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