

The hardest cut.

I have been taking hardwood cuttings from a rose that grows through my front hedge. I welcome most callers at the conventional points of entry, I am not so keen on those who proselytise, but even then I remain polite provided the social conventions are observed. I do not welcome those whose intentions do not conform to these conventions. A prickly rose on a corner can be off putting in a decorative manner, there are some nice ornamental gorses, variegated hollies and various berberis as well, however, I digress, already.

It was not the Evangelists, Baptists, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses coming through my gate, but the rose growing beside it that stimulated my thinking as I selected suitable stems. Roses have been around us far longer than Christianity in any of its forms. They are so tied into our culture and language that when we say the name we think of a cultivar, not the uncultivated variety, we distinguish those as 'wild' roses. On the odd occasion one has cause to mention the panther in the front room one's guests do not find it in the least odd when one hastens to assure them that it is tame, however, if I mention the cat I feel under no such compulsion, cats have been with us so long we assume they are tame. Similarly with plants; most cultivated ornamentals are the discoveries of eighteenth and nineteenth century plant hunters, or variations that have arisen in the last couple of hundred years and are still closely related. We know they are generally the natural plant transplanted to an un-natural environment and the term 'wild' refers to where they grow, not a difference in form. Roses seem always to have been cultivated. Red and white roses were the symbols of Royal houses in the fifteenth century, but they were old then. The damask rose arrived from Damascus before the plague did, the Ancient Greeks wrote of the scent of roses, they are as domesticated as the cat; I'm getting carried away again.

One cannot take cuttings from many of the modern roses, which are bred for their top growth and do not do well on their own roots; they are grown on a root stock. If you look at the base of the plant you will see where the graft joins the two plants just above ground level. Shoots growing from the root below that graft show the characteristics of the wild briar, leave them too long and the briar takes over and overwhelms the cultivar. I was once asked to prune a rose growing across the side of an old manor house. It was a massive and ancient rose that had not been tackled for some time, and it took me a while getting it all tied back and tidy between ground and first floor. Later that year the householder complained that although it had flowered profusely as a result, and the flowers were a very pretty pink, they had only lasted a day or so before they wilted. When I went back and looked I found I had carefully pruned the dog rose that had taken over from the cultivar years before, I was glad I had not taken cuttings.

While many roses grow on a root stock, some, especially the more old fashioned varieties, are good on their own roots, the one by my gate is one of them. Its flowers come in great, pink bunches on arching growths that spring from the base, through the hedge, and then another five or six feet above it. Every so often I prune a few of these stems out to stimulate new

growth. Hardwood cuttings are taken in late autumn or early winter, and as the name implies they are taken from older, harder growth. One cuts a stick into sections about six inches long, a sloping cut at the top and a square one at the bottom reduce the area exposed to fungal infection in the ground to a minimum and shed water from the cut above ground; they also help you remember which way up to put them in the ground, there are no leaves at this time of year. The gardening books say make a trench about four inches deep, but for a vigorous rose I simply work my spade in and wriggle it back and forth to make a slot, then, when I have put in the cuttings about four to six inches apart, tread hard against the stem with my heel to close the ground up. It helps the 'healing in' if the slot is angled slightly and it doesn't seem to affect whether or not the cuttings strike.

Pick somewhere a bit sheltered, they will be there all winter, and leave them through the next summer until autumn, by when they should have a healthy root system. If I pot them on I usually stand the pots under cover in the unheated greenhouse, a severe winter can freeze a pot right through, harsh treatment for a recently transplanted, new root system. This is a great way of producing new plants, with a high success rate and is good for most woody shrubs, such as philadelphus, forsythia, and flowering currant as well as a number of climbers like summer and winter jasmine and the honeysuckles.

It is a bit slow, some people do not want to wait a year, I am told that by putting the cuttings in a pot rather than the ground and placing it on a heated pad to bring the temperature in the pot up to 70 degrees or so one can speed the process, but it does not appeal. It is strange, but as I grow older and the amount of time left to me decreases I am quite happy to take things at a slower, more deliberate, pace; it is not simply the physical constraint of an old body that slows me, I also gain enjoyment from achieving a result with basic implements, a sharp blade and a spade.