

## Rosemary, a Pruning Topic

By Cass Turnbull

### About Rosemary

For a while I was very keen on rosemary, thinking of it as a great design-workhorse. I believe that fully two-thirds of every garden needs to be planted in shrubs that stay under five feet tall, which makes them technically small or lower-story plants. Although a full-grown rosemary is about the size of your dining-room table (2.5' x 4'), the mature size is usually much bigger than what was imagined when the plant was sited. Still, rosemary is much smaller than most medium-sized shrubs, which are about the size of your basic outdoor shed (8' x 6'). Nor is it the size of a large shrub like a leather-leaf viburnum or an adult Pacific wax myrtle (12' x 12'), the size of a small garage. I like the rosemary because it grows fast, for instant gratification, it



makes people think of herb gardens and Italy, it smells and tastes interesting, and it has great texture (like flames!) and a cool blue-green to add contrast to every yard. Most shrubs are globes and just regular green—too boring if not contrasted with something else. Like rosemary.

### Rosemary and the World Wide Web

I have always, by habit, written from my own experience, not just parroting what other writers say. But with the advent of the web, I couldn't help but check my knowledge base against what's out there. Boy, was I surprised. I would avoid both of the two techniques I found. The first was a YouTube video on how

to thin out rosemary, by cutting stems to the ground or to parent stems. In my world I try NOT to open it up and stop it from looking scraggly. I did once see a PlantAmnesty gardener thin out a rosemary shrub at a renovation workshop, and it came out nice. I was impressed that it worked. My experience is that it doesn't often work well. The other video showed a rather severe heading back in winter of all the scraggly branches by about 1/3 the size of the plant. Yikes! My experience is that rosemary resents heading, so I avoid it. But a gardener friend of mine claims that a young plant can be kept more compact by heading or reducing about ¼ of the branches (to about half to a third the length). I do know that if I whacked back an old rosemary entirely, I would expect it to die. Ten years old is an old rosemary. So, what's up?

## **Rosemary in the Great Pacific Northwest**

Here in the great Pacific Northwest (PNW), rosemary looks great for several years and then gets leggy and woody, with stems starting to turn yellow and die back. For a while you can cut out the dead stuff and head it from time to time in places. Though this process makes it look pretty good, eventually, like lavender, it will get too woody and cranky and need to be removed and replaced. No problem because rosemary is cheap and fast growing. Alternatively, remove and don't replace. Maybe you need the space for some other expanding shrub by now. The branch die-back (yellow branches) seems to be partially related to freeze damage; the other part is related to wet soil. The two together make for an unhappy plant. Rosemary would prefer rocky, well-drained soil in sunny Italy, not the PNW's peculiar dank version of the Mediterranean climate.

## **Undercut**

Mostly I prune rosemary because it has gotten so huge that it is taking over the sidewalk or the pot it's planted in. In such a case, as with so many other plants, I cut off the lowest branches (hiding my cuts from view) to reduce the footprint of the plant. As I work, the strong smell of freshly cut rosemary fills my nostrils, and I feel like calling out to passersby, "Buongiorno!" Now that I've done a little research, before I decide to dispatch a too big, too woody plant, I might try a hard cut-back in the spring to see if it rejuvenates. If not, it's "Arrivederci!"