



Almost Everything You Wanted to Know About Roses

Photos and text by Eric A. Riess

Let's face it, roses get a bad rap. Every time I tell people that I have over 100 rose bushes I get strange stares and questions like: "Aren't they tough to grow?" or "Don't They take a lot of work?"

My answer to both is 'no'.

Yes, they can get attract a lot of pests and if you ignore them for weeks on end, you will pay the price of extra time to clean them up. But I have a perennial garden in my front yard and a rose garden out back, and there is really no difference in the amount of time I devote to either.

Granted, if you want a garden that takes no work, you probably don't want either. But very little beauty is achieved with no work at all.

All that said, I admit that my initial interactions with roses were not exactly 'rewarding.' My first plant was a wild bush that took root at the base of a maple sapling in our family's back yard just north of Boston. Dad, wanted to pull it out immediately, but I begged him to let it grow so we could see what the flowers looked like.

Dad liked growing vegetables, but in 70 years of taking care of the same yard, he could never get the hang of flowers.

My rose grew into a thicket of undistinguished hedge roses, which I now know was probably just the root stock left over from some old hybrid that had died years before. The maple and the rose grew in unison for years, until one summer I returned from college to find the 15-foot maple standing alone, and my rose plant uprooted and thrown behind the garage with the rest of the garden waste.

My next interaction ended just as badly. After college I moved home and decided that the back driveway needed a bit of sprucing up, so I convinced Dad, who, by that time really had his fill of anything that

wasn't lawn, to let me plant a few bushes as an edging.

I can't remember the varieties, and it's not really important, because after about three months, all I had to show for my digging, soil preparation and fertilizer, was a pleasant home for a family of beetles, who multiplied every night and ate every leaf in site, leaving more trash for the garage pile.

But that was my New England experience and in the almost 20 years I've lived in California I'm proud to say that the roses and I have made a pretty good team. You just have to understand what they want. I've found them to be some of the toughest, most forgiving plants in the garden. And they reward you with flowers that will knock you socks off.

What I plan to do here, is to provide you with what I've learned, in hopes that you will feel just a bit less intimidated and can marvel at their beauty in your own yard.

As I noted, I'm growing my roses in Northern California, which has pretty perfect conditions. But, with a few exceptions and a few caveats, things are pretty much the same in colder climates where the growing season is, shall we say, "a tad shorter."

Varieties:

Before you head for the store or nursery you need to know what kind of plant want. Of course you want a plant that 'fits' in the space you have, but the other considerations like variety, petal count, color are also important.

Most plants will carry a tag indicating the final size in one growing season. If you don't have room for a 5-foot plant, get something smaller. This may seem like common sense, but I've seen my share of small patios crowded with oversized plants.

Decide if you want a hybrid tea (one bloom per stem) of a floribunda (multiple blooms on one stem). They both require the same conditions and whatever you choose is up to you.

There are also landscape roses which are best for borders and can simply be used as a hedge, and rugosa, or beach roses which have a simple structure with few petals but grow and spread close to the ground. The opposite are climbing roses which grow quickly but need support at some point.

I also mention petal count, because in my area it has special significance. For large parts of the summer in the Bay Area we get lots of fog, so I try to stay away from blooms with large petal counts. Good examples are the David Austin roses which are gorgeous but have a lot of petals in the blooms.

In the spring this is fine but in mid summer there isn't enough sun to dry out the flowers and I wind up with a lot of half-formed blooms that look awful. I have a few but I accept the fact that they won't be very pretty in mid-summer, but in spring and fall they are great.

After that, it's just matter of color. Well, unless you want to consider disease resistance. No rose is immune, not matter what the label says, but if you're in doubt choose something that was an "All American" rose winner. This is an award from the America Rose Society and usually they are great choices and disease resistance.

Additionally you can look up your local rose society. Most publish lists of roses that grow well in your area.

A few years ago the Wall Street Journal had a great article on rose names. Seems there are so many new hybrids that growers are forced to get increasingly creative. Most major movie stars such as Marilyn Monroe or Cary Grant already have roses named after them but often the name is just a phrase that will resonate with buyers.

“Livin’ Easy’ or ‘Frankly Scarlet’ are great examples. I have yet to remember the names of all my plants, I view it as my own brain teaser game, trying to keep sharp by naming each one as I water.

Buying and Planting:

I have a friend, who I respect as a gardener, who buys all his roses at discount garden shop - Big Box stores. If you go early in the season (January in California and March in colder climates) they will have a wide assortment of bare-root roses, with pretty pictures on the plastic wrapping explaining what you will get in a few short months.

In some cases this is true but, as always, the devil is in the details. Often, if you have a question, the clerk will have few, if any, answers. And if you want information about the final size of the plant, or the petal count of the bloom, or want a plant with some shape, you will be out of luck.

You need to know the size so you don’t plant a vigorous 5-foot bush such as ‘Top Notch’ in front of a delicate 3-foot variety like ‘Walking on Sunshine.’ Each plant needs about 4 hours of sun, so creating shade is just asking for poor, weak growth and few flowers, and it’s not the plant’s fault.

You want to make sure they are at least described as disease resistant, although no rose is ever fully immune to bugs and other problems. Of course, you can never tell at the ‘Big Box’ store if the rose you’re buying is already infected.

You want ‘class one’ roses, which generally means they have three canes growing out from the center in a rough triangle. At the Big Box store, this kind of plant takes up way too much room for their sales space, so, while the plant will grow it may not have the shape you see in rose catalogues.

Once Spring weather arrives, wherever you are, you will find roses that did not sell as bare root plants, potted in soil. They usually cost a bit more, but are less of a hassle since, if you don’t want to plant them right away, they can probably stay in their container for one of two growing seasons.

Unfortunately. Most nurseries use plastic pots for cost and convenience. Some, do not drain well and roses like some air flow around their roots, which is impossible in a plastic pot. Some centers use large peat pots, which do breathe and can be planted directly into the soil, where the peat will disintegrate over time. But, I still think it inhibits root growth as the plants age.

Rose roots are the key factor in transplanting. All plants have large main roots but during the growing season small fine white feeder roots develop to provide nourishment. If the potted rose has been planted for a while many of these fine roots can be destroyed during transplanting. If the plant was just put into the pot, chances are the roots have not formed and transplanting poses less of a threat.



Elle

If you transplant during the colder weather when the plant is dormant (December and January in California and October and November in colder climates) then the fine roots will re-grow as the weather warms.

If you buy a bare-root plant it's usually best to unwrap the plant and place it in a small bucket of water for a day or so before planting. That gives the plant some time to reabsorb moisture that has been lost as it sat on a shelf waiting for you. If you buy from a nursery, where you have pre-ordered your plant, there may not be any packaging beyond some paper to make the plant easier to handle.

Planting:

Roses do not like to be wet. They love water but they don't want to be sitting in soil that does not drain. So, if you're planting in a pot, make sure there's a drainage hole at the bottom and some rocks to give the water a chance to get out.

While I'm on the subject of containers, I should point out that most any rose will grow in a container. Normally they have rather small root balls so they can easily stay in a 24 inch pot (measured across the top) for five years or more. I prefer clay because it allows air to get to the roots, but glazed pottery or even plastic will work.



Gertrude Jekyll

I have one rather large rose, Ingrid Bergman, in a pot and she's doing well, but each year she asks to be transplanted into the 'real garden.' A tall plant like Ingrid does not look her best in a short pot, but that's more aesthetics than need. I've promised that this winter she will get a new home.

Also note that roses in pots can be easily burned by too much fertilizer and after 5 or 6 years you might see a drop in blooms if the roots have filled the container. I try to add a healthy dose of compost and new soil each spring when the growing season begins.

Roses want 4-5 hours of sun per day and love the warmth. Less sun will mean fewer roses. In the spring when the plants are recovering from winter they can need an inch of water per week. Roses in pots need to be watered every two or three days while roses in the ground might wait three or four days between watering. More on this later.

If you are planting in the ground it's good to dig a hole at least two feet wide. I know the plant isn't that big, but you can then put in the kind of soil that will drain well and position the plant the way you want. After digging the proper size hole spread out the roots of the bare-root rose to make sure they aren't all bunched in one place. Be careful not to break anything, but if you do, don't worry, the rose will re-grow the root, although it will be very mad at the extra work.

Make sure the main stem is straight and that the joint is in the proper location.

What the heck does that mean, you ask? To create 'disease resistant roses' most plants are really a combination of two plants. A vigorous disease resistant root stock with the varietal that makes the flowers you love, grafted to the top. Where the two plants are joined there is often a knobby looking bulge.

Anything that grows from below the bulge will look like the root stock. These are usually an ugly red variety that just sucks life from the main plant. They can start to grow any time during the year and are usually