

What Every Aspiring Rose Grower Should Know

By Howard E. Jones

Growing roses successfully does not have to be difficult. However, some would-be growers of our National Flower are scared-off by the prevailing myth that “*roses are hard to grow and not for the casual gardener*”. Having said this, I must warn you that there are certain fundamental requirements and conditions that you must know to be successful, in spite of the fact that roses are very forgiving and tolerant of our occasional neglect and abuse.

In the following article I would like to briefly cover all of the essentials to good rose culture. It is impossible in a short article to cover any of these topics in depth, as each could be the subject of a separate article.

I would suggest that the essentials to successful rose growing are: Location, Planting, Feeding and Fertilizing, Watering and Mulching, Disease and Insect Control, and Winter Protection. Keep in mind that this article is intended to just head you in the right direction and to make you aware of the conditions and practices that are basic to successful rose growing. Here goes...

Location For Beds

Roses need a minimum of five to six hours of direct sun and more would be better. Morning sun is preferable, if you have a choice, in order that the foliage will dry quickly from nighttime moisture (both heavy dews and rain).

Also, rose bushes require good drainage. They need lots of water but do not like their feet (roots) constantly standing in water.

Finally, it is helpful if your bushes have some protection from the cold winter north winds but still have good air circulation. Your house, a fence, or a hedge may supply that protection. You may not have a “perfect” location since you have to work within the confines of your own yard. Just pick the best location possible.

Planting

Proper planting is extremely important in getting your rose bushes off to a good start. Don't just stick them in a hastily dug hole in the ground.

First, you need to test the pH of the soil where you are going to plant your roses. If it is in the 6.0 to 6.8 range, adjust it by using agricultural limestone to raise the level and agricultural sulfur to the lowest level.

Improve the water and air holding capacity of your soil by adding organic matter (peat moss, compost, well rotted horse manure, etc.) and *Perlite*, which is a permanent soil conditioner and will not break down. I also like to add crushed pine bark to this mixture.

It is best to prepare the bed in the fall for spring planting, as this allows the bed to mellow out and settle. Even when planting in a prepared bed, I dig individual holes that are approximately 22 inches wide and 20 inches deep for each bush.

You should allow 30 to 36 inches between bushes when planting Hybrid Tea roses in a bed. The bottom 10 or 12 inches of the hole (probably mostly clay) should be discarded and amendments (organic matter and *Perlite*) thoroughly mixed with the retained soil. You may need to bring in some topsoil if your soil is very poor. Also, raised beds can help where drainage is a problem.

Pruning

Modern rose bushes need to be severely pruned on an annual basis. This should be done when the bushes first start to break dormancy in the late winter or early spring and new growth starts. This will vary from year to year and for different weather zones and locations within the zone. In Virginia Beach, our time for pruning is normally around the first of March.

Any dead canes and small twiggy growth should be removed and the center of the bush opened up. If there are lots of viable canes, they should be reduced to five or six of the strongest and newest canes and these canes shortened to 15 to 24 inches in length. The larger the diameter of the cane, the longer in height that you can leave it.

Make sure the pith (interior) of the cane is white or a greenish white; and if on your first cut the inside of the cane is tan or dark, continue to cut back until you get good healthy wood. If you only have three or four healthy canes, that is sufficient to get a bush off to a new start for the new season.

Don't let your bush intimidate you, and don't be afraid that you will harm it if you cut back aggressively. Rose bushes thrive on being pruned and this process stimulates new growth.

Feeding and Fertilizing

Roses are heavy feeders, particularly modern roses that repeat bloom throughout the long growing season. They will reward you with extra blooms and better quality if you have a feeding program.

They should be fertilized at least once a month during the growing season. It does not have to be complicated. Using one of the water-soluble fertilizers (*Peters*, *Magic-Gro*, *Rapid-Gro*, etc) according to the directions, will work quite well; or, using a cup of 10-10-10 granular fertilizer per large bush will do the job.

Be sure to water before and after fertilizing and don't fertilize newly planted bushes until they start to bloom, in order to avoid damage to new feeder roots.

It is not as important what you fertilize with, as it is that you fertilize. Also, roses really like organic fertilizer, so treat them with some fish emulsion, alfalfa meal or other organics.

Watering and Mulching

The most important single factor in growing roses, as in growing other plants, is water. If you have good drainage, either natural or man-made, it is unlikely that you will give them too much water.

Depending upon your soil, rose bushes need at least one inch per week, and two inches would probably be better. I have watered two inches one day and had a cloudburst the next day, which dropped an additional four inches of rain, and the bushes seemed to thrive on it.

Water, water, water, but water heavy once or twice a week rather than lightly more often. You need to get the water deep in the root zone in order to encourage deep rather than shallow roots.

A mulch two to three inches deep around your rose bushes will conserve water, keep the soil from crusting over, prevent run-off and keep the root zone cooler in hot weather and warmer in cold weather. In addition, it will enhance the appearance of your beds and roses.

I prefer pine bark mulch, but many other materials are suitable. It is a personal and economic choice, and pine straw, cedar bark, hardwood chips and peanut hulls also work well as mulch.

Disease and Insect Control

Unfortunately, in most parts of the country it is necessary to spray your rose bushes on a regular basis (every 7 – 10 days) to prevent and keep under control black spot and powdery mildew.

Black spot is the most damaging of the common fungus diseases, in that it will defoliate a rose bush if not controlled. *Funginex* and *Daconil* are two of the fungicides that give you good control of black spot.

If powdery mildew is a problem, *Rubigan* and *Sythane* are two effective fungicides.

You may also need to control certain insects from time to time and *Orthene* is a good general insecticide.

Spider mite control provides the biggest challenge for me, and spider mites can only be controlled by a miticide or using water under high pressure to wash the spider mites off the underside of the foliage. *Avid* is a very effective miticide and a combination of a water wand to wash them off and spraying with *Avid* should give you good control of this menace that can defoliate your bushes very quickly.

Be sure and wear protective clothing and goggles when spraying.

Winter Protection

Fortunately in our Hampton Roads area, roses need little or no winter protection. After the first hard freeze, I cover the bud union (the knot or bulge where the graft to the understock took place) or lower part of the bush with three to four full shovels of pine bark mulch.

Other types of mulching material or soil can be used. In cooler areas you may have to use more elaborate methods of protection. There are a number of techniques, but I will not attempt to discuss them in this article. Just remember, the colder the weather, the more protection your roses will need.

The most important factor in your bushes surviving the winter is going into the winter strong and healthy.

All of the above information is just to make you aware of the different components in good rose culture. As you become a more experienced grower you will add to your store of knowledge about the basics in rose growing. I won't tell you that roses thrive on neglect, but they are very forgiving of the mistakes we make and are amazingly tough. They are basically survivors. If you just follow through on the good cultural practices that are outlined in this article and make roses a priority in your life, they will respond with blooms and foliage that you can take pride in. Happy rose growing.