

Poor David's Almanac

By Dave Ingram, Master Rosarian

*"The Gardener's Job:
To prune the strains of time away,
A great tomorrow begins today."*

Getting Started With Roses – Volume III (April)

Last article we talked about rose hardiness, and I shared my best tip to help you locate sources for your first plants. We also outlined a strategy for existing roses in your garden in the early spring.

It is my goal to share with you some of the things I learned as a non-gardener starting with roses. But here is my secret agenda! These articles don't have all the answers. If I'm lucky, they'll make you think of a lot of questions.

Secret Tip: Visit www.denverrosesociety.org for information on how to obtain our book: *Growing Roses In Colorado*. Read through it for more answers; then write your remaining questions down and ask our Consulting Rosarians by e-mail or over the phone. Ask our members at meetings. We're enthusiasts! We will answer!

New Gardens

As the days begin to warm in April, that new garden you prepared should be growing a lot of worms and microorganisms, so when we plant in May, the soil will be ready to help your new roses get off to a flying start. Make sure the soil stays moist, and look for any signs of drainage problems that need correcting before you plant. April is when a lot of garden centers put their roses out so you can look them over, although they may not release them for sale until later in the month. A couple of things to think about:

Buying Tip: The urge to buy this month is strong. When I see a rose I want, my hand strays toward my wallet. Keep in mind, we're not going to plant until around Mother's Day in May. If you take the rose home early, you'll just have to take care of it. I learned to let the garden center do the work until late in the month, unless I find the perfect plant or they are low on selection. Or I just can't stand it.

Buying Tip: Some garden centers grow their roses indoors in a greenhouse environment. That means the plant will have to be "hardened off" by gradual exposure to the outdoors over a week or so. Get a copy of the garden center's hardening off instructions, so you know what's required. Also, find out whether you'll have to feed your new rose this year, after planting. Some garden

centers use time-release fertilizer when they pot the rose. If so, more feeding is probably unnecessary, and may even be harmful. As we mentioned last article, there are two types of rose plants offered for sale. You should know and understand the difference:

Own Root: A cutting from a mother plant is rooted and grown into a saleable plant. Many of us believe that own-root plants are healthier and superior in the long run, since if a terrible winter kills the plant to the ground, it can grow back from the stem underground. Most of my Canadian shrubs and antique roses are on their own roots. Providing own-root plants can be a costly and time-consuming process; those sold over the Internet are commonly smaller at purchase time and may need three years or more to reach mature size. Modern techniques have allowed Knock Outs® and some other shrubs (Easy Elegance®, landscape shrubs, miniatures) are be sold on their own roots in local nurseries. Slowly, the rose industry is offering additional modern varieties on their own roots.

Grafted Roses: For many years, this was the industry standard, and still is with Hybrid Teas and Floribundas. Start with a vigorous root stock like ‘Dr. Huey’ that grows like a weed and can send canes out 12 feet or more. Take a small cutting of a Hybrid Tea variety like ‘Peace’ and splice it (graft it) onto the root stock, and once it “takes,” cut away everything else and pretty soon - Voila! A new ‘Peace’ rose. Why do it this way? Time and money. You can turn out far more saleable plants in less time. Also, certain Hybrid Teas and Floribundas grow better when grafted. There are two main drawbacks. Sometimes the root stock will send up a separate shoot called a sucker that has to be torn away at the place it started underground (a hassle). Also, if the graft union freezes and dies, the named variety is lost and next year you might have the root stock growing like crazy all over your yard (bad thing). If you’re planning to buy some Hybrid Teas and Floribundas, they’ll probably be grafted plants. Here’s my advice:

Rose Planting Tip: When we plant in May, we’ll follow the guidelines in *Growing Roses in Colorado* to plant the graft union 2 to 4 inches underground. That minimizes or eliminates the drawbacks, and sets you up to grow a beautiful rose that will last you many years. For own-root roses, our advice is to plant the branching point 1 to 2 inches below soil level. This is the best way to keep our rose plants safe from our varying weather conditions.

Buying Tips: If you decide to buy roses before the end of April, here’s what I do. I ignore any buds or flowers at the top of the plant. No matter how beautiful now, they’ll be gone quickly. I only look at the base, from the soil to about a foot up. That’s the part you’ll be dealing with as long as you own the plant. Look for three strong healthy canes coming out of the graft union (the “knot” the branches come out of), or even branching on an own-root plant. Air should be able to circulate; the canes should not rub. Once you get the plant home, water it. Never let a day go by without checking the pot for water. That is what garden centers do; now it’s your job.

Existing Gardens

In early May, after the danger of frost has passed, you will have to cut your roses back. This process is called pruning. We all do this to our roses, but the first couple of times can be a bit unnerving. What? Cut my plant? It's just starting to grow! But good pruning can help all roses grow much better. *Growing Roses in Colorado* explains the details of this process (and the DRS has a hands-on clinic each April you are encouraged to attend); but think of it this way: your roses spend the summer growing however they want, then they spend the winter paying for it. When you study them in April, even with the hardiest shrubs, you'll see places where canes have grown across each other and are rubbing (bad thing), other places that have weak, spindly growth, often in the center of the plant that impedes air circulation (fungal diseases love this). Plus, any canes that have died over the winter have to go. And when you evaluate half-hardy roses like Hybrid Teas, you'll probably notice that much of the upper growth has browned and died, and even the green canes may have blackened splotches on them, which is a sign of cell destruction.

Reminder Tip: Most of us do our final pruning once the danger of frost is past in early May. We don't want frost to damage the new growth we have encouraged. But I've put the guidelines here in April so you can learn them and study your plants ahead of time.

Pruning Tip: Prune for the future. By cutting out dead, winter damaged, weak, or unruly growth, you set your rose up to have the healthiest, happiest flowering year possible.

Beginner's Tip: When you cut into good, living wood, it sends a chemical signal to the plant to grow. When you are just starting out with roses, it's best to send this signal after the danger of frost has passed, generally around Mother's Day. Remember, most new growth is around 90% water, and very frost sensitive. You'll figure out soon enough which of your roses are hardier, and can be pruned earlier. But the first year or two, let's be cautious.

Pruning Tip: Plan to prune out the oldest canes of inherited plants to help renew the plant with young, fresh growth.

Pruning Tip: Many rosarians cut their hardy shrubs back by one-third to encourage a good flush of new growth. Keep in mind though, you can't train a rose just by cutting it. You may open up an area, but then the rose will grow as it wants. I suppose it's a bit like lion taming (there is no truth to the rumor that Poor David goes out to prune with a chair and a whip).

Pruning Tip: Don't be afraid to prune for balance. Example: Take one of my Hybrid Teas, say with 4 ft. canes, one cane might be brown (dead) to just above the mulch, the next might be green with new growth (!!!) near the top, but ugly black or brown dead splotches a foot off the ground (this cane probably has to go—too damaged and weak to survive the summer, despite that new growth), and a third cane that looks perfectly healthy. I pull the mulch back to expose the plant base, then cut the first brown cane until I reach good, green wood (if possible); cut the second cane below the dead splotches, check the condition of the wood, then work my way down a few inches at a time to good wood. Then I try to steel my nerves and cut the third cane (sob!) to

match the first two. This makes for a balanced, attractive bush that will grow back faster than you think. What? Cut away any new growth that might flower? Art thou kidding? Nope . . . think of two soda straws – one clear and open, the other clogged with enough tissue to impede most of the soda. Half-hardy roses like Hybrid Teas and Floribundas rarely make it through the winter with open, healthy straws. Any dead tissue acts like a clog. These roses are tough—they'll try to grow anyway, no matter how hard it is. But the kindest thing you can do is cut below the clogs to fresh, good wood. This will encourage the plant to grow more actively and maybe put out new growth from ground level (basal breaks - great thing!) You'll get a lot more flowers over the summer and lower the stress on the plant (which should mean less disease and insect problems - good thing).

Last Tip: Pruning roses with dull shears is almost as bad as not pruning them at all. Before you start, get your pruning shears as sharp as you can. Are you new to pruning and want some hands-on instruction and practice? The Denver Rose Society hosts an annual Pruning Demo at the Jefferson County Detention Center in late April. Check the DRS website calendar for schedule and details. Bring your pruners (or, if you haven't bought any yet, you can learn what kind to buy) and we'll show you how to make the right cuts to the right wood, and let you try some yourself. Come join us, and trade your uncertainty for some experience, as you prepare to wade into your garden in May.

Next article: All those new roses you begin to accumulate toward the end of the month? We'll roll up our sleeves and stick those babies in the ground! And for existing roses, my theory is, if you're pruning 'em, you might as well feed 'em. So we'll cover that.