

Poor David's Almanac

By Dave Ingram, Master Rosarian

*"Gardeners beware: Don't be fooled,
That which has warmed will yet be cooled."*

Getting Started With Roses – Volume II (March)

This article, aimed at new rose growers, should be used in conjunction with your copy of “*Growing Roses in Colorado*.” Last article we covered planning and preparing new gardens, along with what to do with roses you already have.

New Gardens

If you're like me when you laid out your new rose bed, you probably changed your mind about rose selection a bunch of times. That's okay (as long as the men with the butterfly nets don't find out), but keep in mind, pretty pictures in a book do not always mean pretty flowers in Denver. We are a high-plains, semi-arid location with hot, dry summer days and cold, windy, changeable winters (USDA Zone 5b). So let me propose three categories to evaluate roses in our area:

Hardy—comes through the winter with little cane damage; at most, no more than half.

Half-hardy—canes always die back by at least half, and may die back to the ground, but if planted and protected properly, the plant survives just fine and storms back in spring.

Tender—Not able to survive our winters. You'll rarely find these plants for sale in Denver, but they are available over the internet.

To find hardy roses, research groups like the Canadian Explorer and Morden series, the Buck roses, and certain German releases. These tend to grow in shrub form, and have simpler—but still lovely—flowers. The best source I have found locally is Harlequin Nurseries, located just north of Boulder. They specialize in hardy roses. In recent years, other nurseries have expanded their selections.

Hardy Tip: The only real way to know if a rose is hardy in our climate is to ask Denver Rose Society members, Consulting Rosarians (there is a list on our website), and qualified nursery pros. We've grown them, and know what happens here. Someone writing a book in Georgia does not. Barring that, the lower the winter rating (say, Zone 3), the more likely the rose is to be fully hardy here in Zone 5. You'll also find a list of Recommended Roses for Colorado on our website, and a more thorough list in “*Growing Roses in Colorado*.”

Most of us grow at least some half-hardy roses, such as Hybrid Teas and Floribundas. You'll find these for sale in most garden centers and this type of rose accounts for more than half of roses sold locally. Most grow great in our area. But be aware—along with to-die-for flowers come genes for temperature sensitivity. Mine need proper planting, along with more careful pruning, feeding and watering to do their best. But oh my, the flowers! I grow a lot of them. They are worth the effort. Don't be afraid of them!

Half-hardy Tip: The secret to growing great Hybrid Teas and Floribundas is to plant them properly in good soil, pay extra attention to them (they're divas; they respond to this!), and provide some winter protection. You'll find all this information in "*Growing Roses in Colorado*." Remember plant spacing! As we mentioned last month, overcrowded plants cause problems you don't need. So learn the plant habits from "*Growing Roses*," and ask questions from local nurseries, who are used to the sizes plants reach in this area.

Planning Tip: Put stakes in your new garden to show plant location, and no matter how empty it looks, trust your research.

Once you've decided on your varieties and how many will fit (Poor David usually needs to be chained to a post until he makes up his mind), where do you find your plants? By this time of year, most local garden centers know exactly what they'll carry, and a call or a visit can whittle down your dream list. And for a new rose grower, here is the crux of my advice for this month:

Golden Tip: Set aside the time and the money to find the best plants available. Buy only #1 grade roses from local garden centers that know how to grow and maintain the best plants, and stand behind them. If you start with cheaper or lesser plants and they don't perform, you'll never know - is it the plant, or me?

Which brings up this question: What about the big box stores? My experience has been that a nation-wide chain often stocks at least some roses not appropriate for the Denver area. Employees may not know what they are getting in until the shipment arrives. And if the plants have been damaged en route by temperature, rough handling or lack of water, they may sit there on the pallet lookin' pretty, but deteriorate once you plant them in the ground. Also, in some cases, the big box stores save money by bringing in lesser quality plants, like Grades #1½ or #2. They rarely perform like the best #1 Grade plants. These roses can be a great way to save money once you have some experience, but when you are just starting out, why ask for trouble?

Existing Gardens

As the days lengthen and we start to get warmer days in March, dig into the soil to check for moisture more often. Don't say, "Oh, they look like they could use some water."

Make sure the protective mulch is intact.

Keep the garden surface as clean as possible.

Only cut canes that are broken at the place they snapped. Cutting a living rose cane now may send a chemical signal to the plant to grow, and as we covered in the last article, right now that will just cause trouble. As it is, I'm seeing the first signs of life in my gardens; some of the half-hardy plants are starting to sputter awake, fooled by the occasional warm, sunny days, and it's too early for them to succeed at that. The canes swell with water, send out new growth, and then the freezing temperatures that we still get until early May destroy the new growth before it can mature, and may damage the older canes. In my garden, I find this is the biggest reason I have to prune half-hardy roses down near the ground each year. Yes, they are more vulnerable to winter temperatures and drying winter winds, but they also struggle with the freeze-thaw cycles we get in March and April.

Our strategy this month is to make sure the plant roots do not dry out, and have enough of a protective mound of mulch at their base to ensure the rose can come back from the ground, if necessary, no matter what happens. Be patient. In the next article,

Next article— We'll talk about when to turn you loose with pruning shears and fertilizer to get those babies fired up and blooming for this year. And we'll do a little primer on that mysterious process called pruning.

Plus: Did you know there are two different types of rose plants offered by nurseries? We will explain own root vs. grafted roses. Read on!