

Poor David's Almanac

By Dave Ingram, Master Rosarian

*"When gardeners start to plant and prune,
The flowers will be coming soon."*

Getting Started With Roses – Volume IV (May)

In this series for beginning rose growers, we talked last article about shopping for roses, and explained the difference between grafted and own-root plants. We also covered how to prune any existing roses you may have, which we are going to try to do in May.

In each article, we always start by reminding you to purchase and read through "*Growing Roses In Colorado*", published by The Denver Rose Society. These "Getting Started" articles reflect my experiences learning about rose growing, and are designed to complement "*Growing Roses*," not replace it. This is particularly important in May, as we get ready to plant new roses and prune and feed existing plants.

New Gardens

Let's review for a moment. You have dug and prepared your new garden or planting holes, and that soil is busy right now growing microorganisms and breaking down organic matter—good soil is a living thing that interacts with your plants. You have decided on varieties, studied their mature sizes, and used stakes to mark their places in the garden so they won't be overcrowded. You have found one or more garden centers that only stock #1 Grade roses, and hopefully you have visited those centers and practiced selecting good, healthy plants. So, if you haven't already begun purchasing the new rose plants for your garden, now is the time to pounce. Try to choose not just the biggest or the prettiest plant, but the one that is healthiest and strongest at the base, the part you will have to live with. Find out if the plants you are buying are grafted or own root. It matters when we plant. And remember, when you get your new roses home, water them! Never let them dry out!

Buying Tip: Get any care sheets available from the nursery, particularly on hardening off, if the plant has been grown indoors. This needs to be done before planting to prevent further shock to a plant that is going to be shocked enough when we stick it in the ground.

Depending on how the weather goes this year (a very unreliable subject in these parts), if you buy plants from a nursery that usually stores their roses outside (so the plants won't need to be hardened off), you can probably plant them as soon as you get them home. Roses that need hardening off can be planted once this acclimation process is completed.

Planting Tip: Plant your new roses once you decide that any late freezing weather is over (along the Front Range, this is traditionally Mother's Day; but each year is different). The goal is to let plants have adequate time to establish in the ground before the hot weather hits at the end of June, but it's not a good idea to have roses newly planted if a hard freeze is still expected in early May. Use your best judgement, and be sure to keep the pots watered while you are waiting.

After all the work you have already done, planting is easy! The first thing I do on planting morning is water each rose. And you want your garden soil moist, but not soggy. Water is the great "shock absorber" for any major changes to a plant's environment. Now, dig your planting hole twice the width of the pot. Gently ease the rose out of the pot. Don't expose the roots to a lot of direct sunlight (bad thing). Lay a shovel handle or other straight-edge over the top of the hole, and adjust the base of the planting hole so the graft union of the rose (the knot the branches come out of at the base) is 2 to 4 inches below the soil surface (this helps the graft survive our winters). Own-root plants should be placed so the branching point is 1 to 2 inches below surface level. Now, slowly backfill with soil halfway and water until it is soupy. I like to poke my fingers around gently to make sure the soil is settled around the root ball. The danger in planting is leaving air pockets that cannot support root growth. Once the water drains, add more backfill and water, until done. I no longer tamp the soil down around the plant with my hands (and never use your feet!!), to avoid compacting. Water and gravity should settle the soil just fine (remember, a good soil is up to 50% air and water). Take the wire name tag off and attach it to a stake nearby (the wire can damage the cane over time). I like to form a basin around the edge of the planting hole to guide future watering around the rootball. Then mulch well, several inches deep, but try to keep the mulch from covering the stems. This helps hold moisture in, and insulates the new rose against the nasty, real world as the roots take hold. You know, there are times when I wish I had a good mulch to protect me from the real world, too.

Any magic formulas to add to the planting hole? Not really, there is nothing magical about this process. I usually add a little organic fertilizer such as Mile-Hi Rose Feed to the backfill to help feed the soil microbes, and to have some food available for the new roots as they poke their noses into their new home (and away from any time-release food in the root ball). I guess a little root-stimulator in the water you use to settle the plant never hurt anything. But none of that is critical. Remember, it's not the additives, it's the care in preparation and planting that makes the difference.

Follow the "*Growing Roses*" guide for follow-up watering. Your new plant is vulnerable right now. Both over- and under-watering can harm or kill it, so learn your roses' watering needs by sticking your fingers into the soil to learn moisture levels. Once the rose is well established over the next year or two, it will be a tough little warrior.

Existing Gardens

The first thing I do as I approach the time to prune my roses is to look the plants over a couple of days before I start, to roughly plan out what each one needs to be prepared for the coming summer.

Pruning Plan:

1. Water the plants the day before to help guard against shock.
2. Prune without trampling and compacting the soil around the plant (pruning solves one problem, but soil compaction causes another. Remember the 50% air space rule).
3. Fertilize the rose to help it start growing.
4. Water again—to move liquid food down into the root zone, or to moisten organic fertilizers so microbes can begin breaking them down.

If you have never pruned before, then I say wait until the last danger of frost has passed (our average last frost is around the middle of May). If your best guess is that frost is over (and in Colorado, even the pros can only guess), then get out there and have at it! Re-read “*Growing Roses*” article on pruning, and try to wade through the last “Getting Started” article for more help.

Pruning Tip: Take the time to sharpen your pruning shears. It is easy to do yourself, or better garden centers can do it for a fee. Sharp pruners make clean cuts. That’s what you want.

Pruning Tip: *Relax!* If your roses have made it this far, through hot summers and long, cold, changeable winters, then I doubt you will do them any lasting damage while pruning. I have made many “accidental” cuts that I thought were disasters (provoking those short, one word outbursts you don’t want others to hear), but a lot of them turned out to be the work of genius by the end of summer. Go for it! You will learn from what you do right, as well as wrong.

Pruning Guidelines: With bushy shrubs and miniatures, begin by cutting out all dead wood, crossing canes, and weak, spindly growth. With half-hardy Hybrid Teas and Floribundas, cut along the remaining growth until you reach fresh, whitish wood (like the inside of a Granny Smith apple), even if this takes you close to the ground. Try to cut to bud eyes (the place where leaves were attached: this is where the new growth will sprout from) that face outward. Open the center of the plant to light and airflow. Prune for the future.

Pruning Tip: Seal the cut ends of the canes with a waterproof wood glue or colored nail polish. This keeps cane-boring wasps from drilling into the ends of your canes to lay their eggs (bad thing). This is particularly important with any cuts near the base of the plant.

Pruning Tip: Some of us prune climbers after their first bloom has finished (this might take you into July). This gives you the maximum bloom now, before trimming for the future. Also, prune once-blooming roses (this includes many Old Garden Roses) after they bloom, and before they

start next year's growth. Think bloom, prune, and let 'em grow for next year's bloom. You can trim out any obviously dead canes now, but leave the rest for max bloom.

Fertilizing: As you learned from "*Growing Roses*," there are a lot of ways to feed a rose bush. If you are just starting out, here's my advice. Pick a simple fertilizing plan, and stick to it. This will help you learn what works about your plan, as well as what does not. Some of us like to use an organic fertilizer like the Mile-Hi Rose Feed products (slow starting, longer lasting = fewer doses). Others use chemical fertilizers, either dry or liquid (fast acting, shorter duration = more doses). Time-release pellets are convenient, but no one knows how accurate the "time-release" is, and keep in mind I'm going to tell you later not to feed past August 15th.

Start by leveling out the mulch and soil around the rose bed. Winter's over, so the mulch can be at 2 to 3 inches throughout the bed. Liquid fertilizers can be poured right through the mulch, then watered down into the root zone, but for organics, you should pull the mulch back from the plant and scratch the fertilizer into the soil (Yeah, feed those soil organisms! I always like to think of baby birds in the nest, mouths agape, waiting for momma to feed them). Then re-install the mulch, and water to moisten the fertilizer. Since it is smart to pull the mulch back when you prune so you can see the entire plant, you might as well fertilize at the same time.

Feeding Tip: Be sure to follow the fertilizer instructions. Too much fertilizer can be worse than too little. And remember, miniatures need ½ or less of a regular dose. Give them the children's dose. They'll do fine.

Feeding Rule: The feeding of roses is all about: (1) balance, (2) consistency, and (3) adequate water.

Inherited or Neglected Plants: If a rose has spent several years under duress from neglect, you can't bring it back with a single dose of fertilizer (a starving person needs to be built up with a variety of broths and light foods before they can handle a steak). So spend this year watering often, build the soil life by adding organic matter like compost, then add organic fertilizer (slow release) or bi-weekly doses of liquid fertilizer at ½ strength, maybe even 1/4 strength, until the plant shows you how it is able to respond. Prune lightly (deadwood only), until it is clear where any new growth will come from, then cut to that growth. If the roses you have inherited look healthy enough, then prune and feed the roses normally.

Next article: Wow! Look at those roses growing like weeds!! Don't they look great? Yep, that's probably what all the ravenous insects are thinking that are getting ready to head toward your garden. We'll talk about strategies to deal with them.