

HOW TO CHOOSE A ROSE

By Carol Macon, Master Consulting Rosarian

As anyone who has ever been faced with a small mountain of garden catalogs every January knows, choosing a rose is not easy. First of all, there are a lot of them. Hybridizers still hybridize, and dozens of new varieties come to market each year. Secondly, while it seems to me that roses are getting better and better as garden plants, especially in terms of hardiness and disease-resistance, this does not mean that inferior rose varieties are no longer coming to market. Indeed they are, and I shovel prune plants each fall that I planted with high hopes the previous spring, unwilling to pass the miserable things along to another gardener. Those that I, for one reason or another (mostly size, or the encroachment of shade), do give away, must at least be good garden plants, although they may be wrong for the place in which I planted them. In this case, I have lost time and money, because I chose a plant that, when mature, did not work in its designated place in my garden. Obviously, you need to know the mature height and width of any rose you plan to buy, and you must be able to give your rose at least 6 hours of sun a day in the spot you choose to accommodate its dimensions.

This may be a simplistic statement, but before you purchase a rose, you must **know why you want it**. Do you want long-stemmed beauties to arrange in a vase? Do you want a traffic-stopping vivid splash of color in the front yard? Do you want to hide a dead tree, add reliable color to a perennial bed, edge a walkway with plants that bloom all summer, plant a drought-resistant flower bed? Do you want to grow the next Queen of Show? Once you decide on the rose's purpose, you have automatically limited the field from which to choose. (This is the antithesis to my usual method of choosing a rose because I like its picture, or have fallen in love with a bloom in a greenhouse.)

Then, and this is the toughie, you should **know where you are going to plant the rose**. Like many another gardener of mature years and mature garden, I have limited space for anything new. In fact, every year, I plant roses in pots that sit on our driveway, because there is no room for them in the ground. Forty- two of them used to spend the winter in our garage. These facts do not stop me from ordering new varieties every year. Now, I ask you, how smart is that? The only saving grace of my method is that I can evaluate the new, potted roses during our summer season, and use the best ones to replace older varieties in my garden in the fall. (Yes, I plant potted roses into my garden in September.) This would work even better if I weren't so emotionally attached to those older varieties. I once had a strong (read hardy and vigorous) plant of Sutter's Gold that gave me five or six bloom cycles every summer. I took it out to plant show star Gold Medal, and I regretted losing Sutter's freely given garden color. See Rule 1: Know why you want it.

Now, assuming that you have a need for a new rose in your landscape, a specific need, for which you need a specific type of rose; and further assuming that you know exactly where this rose is to be planted; and, further, that you know what size rose the spot can accommodate, what's next? Obviously, because we live in Colorado, where winter temperatures can remain below zero for days and then scoot to 70 F, and where the growing season is short, **the two most important criteria for any rose are hardiness and vigor**. Without them, we won't have any rose for long. Our rose choice must have a reputation for living a long and happy life a mile high, and it must want to grow, i.e., it must be energetic in its rate of growth and production, each and every year. Now, granted that these factors are often unknown when a rose first comes to market, we still can make educated guesses.

If the rose is an American Rose Society award-winner, supposedly it has been tested for hardiness and vigor all over the USA. Too, if you can wait to plant a couple of years after your chosen rose comes to market, its flaws, if any, will start to turn up in the American Rose Society's annual ritual known as Roses in Review, following which a rating will appear for it in the ARS's annually produced HANDBOOK FOR SELECTING ROSES. As a general rule of thumb, I try to buy only those varieties with a rating of 7.8 or above, which makes them above average roses and more likely to be hardy and vigorous. The handbook is mailed free to every ARS member every year, and many members refer to it when shopping for roses. I firmly believe that any serious rose grower should belong to the American Rose Society. Membership can save you time, trouble and money.

For me, **the most reliable guide to hardiness and vigor in a rose is its national origin**. Roses from Kordes in Germany, Poulsen in Denmark, Fryer and Austin in England and anybody in Canada, usually grow very well in our garden. In contrast, I have never managed to keep a French or South African rose alive much less happy. California roses are always iffy, and I tend to wait a year or two after their debuts to purchase them. How do you know the source of a rose? The first three or four letters of a rose's registered (not market) name are an abbreviation of the producer's name: Kor, Aus, Poul, Fry. And you know that by checking the New Rose Registrations section of your American Rose magazine. Be aware of Germany's ADR designation. ADR testing for hardiness and disease resistance is the most rigorous in the world, and rose varieties with this designation are available for purchase in the USA. The Germans are very serious about their ADR Award; so serious that not only can they award it to a given rose, but they can also take it away. To learn more about ADR testing go here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ADR_rose

The other criteria for selecting a rose are, in order of their importance to me (you may and should have your own scale), **disease resistance, fragrance, form, bloom cycle frequency, substance, petal count, plant size and drought tolerance**. These can sometimes be determined more by what is left out of a catalog description than by what is actually printed.

Assume that if **disease resistance** is not mentioned, you'll need to spray for blackspot and mildew. Assume that if **fragrance** is described as light or not described at all, the rose has no fragrance. Assume that if **high centers or show form** are not mentioned, your rose is strictly for garden color and possibly, arranging. In that case, the plant should be a prolific bloomer, and the description should say so. **Bloom cycles** are dependent on weather and season length. Knowing what you can expect from a hybrid tea or floribunda is based much more on individual experience than it is for, say, an old garden rose which only has one heavy, early summer bloom, or a shrub rose, which will bloom heavily in spring, followed by fewer blooms thereafter, and maybe, a second flush when the weather cools in the fall. **Substance** generally refers to the thickness, texture, crispness, firmness and toughness of the petals. It is a function of the amount of moisture and starch present in the bloom. This is a factor in the bloom's ability to stand up to rain and other environmental stress, including insect infestation. It is also an important factor in the vase life of a cut bloom, and thus, its show worthiness. **Petal count** is usually included in a catalog description. Too few petals may mean a rose may open and blow quickly, making it useless for show. Brandy is a rose that has too few petals to hold its form. Conversely, too many petals may mean that the rose will never open here. Uncle Joe (Toro) is an example of a rose with too many petals to open well in Colorado. And it should be mentioned here, that a catalog's listing of the **height and width** of a rose is based on what the rose is capable of where it was bred. If the rose is a product of Oregon or California, it usually will not attain its stated height and width where the climate is more severe. Conversely, Canadian roses, for the most part, will grow as much as third to a half again higher and wider than they do in Ontario. Austin roses grow higher and wider here, and have fewer disease problems than they do in England.

Many shrub and old garden roses are renowned for their **drought tolerance**, but catalogs generally have not caught up with the current importance of this quality in a rose, and seldom comment upon it. One noteworthy exception is the catalog of High Country Roses, www.highcountryroses.com, which sells drought tolerant roses. You may check on a variety's drought tolerance with your local consulting rosarian. You may have read about Earth-Kind roses, which have been tested by the Texas AgriLife Extension Service for superior pest tolerance, outstanding landscaping performance, and heat and drought tolerance. Be aware that while they may be drought tolerant, several of the relatively few cultivars with this designation are not truly hardy and vigorous on the front range of the Rockies.

Now you know how to choose a rose. Just avoid falling in love in a greenhouse.