

How to Use Companion Plants with Roses

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Whether you like the Diana, Princess of Wales Hybrid tea rose, a Mister Lincoln tree rose or a Tuscan Sun Floribunda, let me suggest ways to make them look even better. Rose aficionados usually plant their roses in rows arranged by color and/or type. The ground is otherwise bare except for the occasional granules of fertilizer thrown on top. That makes most people happy, but not me. I think roses look especially sad during the dormant season with bare sticks all in a row. I prefer placing them throughout the garden singly or in small groups with a variety of “companions”.

One reason I do companion planting is to ensure something is blooming when the roses are not. Ornamental and society garlic are evergreen perennial bulbs which flower most of the time. I am lining some pathways in our flower garden with yellow miniature roses alternating with the garlic bulbs and other seasonal bulbs such as daffodils, paperwhites, muscari, anemones, and more. All those bulbs share the same light, water and fertilizer requirements as the roses. There is always a surprise popping up in every season. A stately buddleia bush reigns supreme in the middle of that bed. The dark purple florets attract a steady stream of butterflies spring to fall.

I also like texture and various shades of green around and among the roses in the garden. Lambs ear (*Lamium*) and lemon thyme ground covers add interest and wonderful fragrance. I have had to relocate some of the lemon thyme because it got too aggressive and too close to the roses. Roses need good air circulation to keep humidity low for disease prevention and should not have companion plants within one foot of them.

Small ornamental grasses are available in all shades of green and look like little Hawaiian grass skirts around the rose trunks. Grasses always look nice, even in the winter. My garden finally has room for Heavenly Bamboo (*Nandina*) to grow naturally. It is an evergreen shrub with lacey foliage that provides good filler and has berries when the roses are dormant.

Many flowers which accentuate the beauty of the roses also attract good bugs such as the ladybug and praying mantis. They eat the aphids which suck the life out of your roses. One of our best companion plants this year has been the profusion orange zinnia which definitely lived up to its name. We planted a few six packs last spring. Each tiny plant spread two feet and acted like a beacon to the good bugs. It did not have the mildew problem most zinnias develop but was covered with good bugs all summer. Those bright orange flowers almost stole the show from the roses!

All our gardens could qualify as “insectaries” because we use a variety of blooming plants that attract the good insects listed above as well as the lacewings, soldier bugs, and syrphid flies. The thought of harming a beneficial insect prevents us from using any insecticide. If there are noticeable aphids on the roses I spray them off with water and wait for the natural pest control agents to take over.

We have rosemary, lavender and sage in several areas. Next spring I plan to incorporate more herbs such as dill, parsley, and lady’s mantle. Herbs add interest, attract good insects and look much better than bare ground around the roses. Just remember to leave room around the trunk so the companion plant doesn’t steal water and nutrients from the rose roots.

We apply at least two inches of compost over all the flower beds. We use natural compost from our plum orchard and composted (well-aged) steer manure from a dairy. We add two to three inches of shredded bark on top of the compost. We leave a few inches of space around each rose trunk or companion plant for air circulation. Heavy mulching enriches the soil naturally by encouraging healthy organisms to flourish. Mulching also prevents moisture loss and hinders weed germination.

This information courtesy of:

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