

February 11, 2015



In Praise of the Perfectly Durable Rose
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“Roses aren’t as thirsty as many gardeners think” -- that title from a Debbie Arrington *Sacramento Bee* article struck me. The rose, sometimes mistakenly cast as difficult to grow, prone to black spot and rust diseases and doomed to borderline existence as a spindly shadow of its former (catalogue image or perfect nursery) self -- could it be that the rose is a drought-tolerant, hardy perennial which could thrive in the foothill garden? In her March 8, 2014, celebration of the hardiness and ease of growing roses, Arrington cites local opinion that established roses only need summertime, once-a-week deep watering. But what else is needed?

From the late 1800’s, American pioneers planted the earliest roses, *Rosa rugosa*, as hedges on the harsh Great Plains’ prairie homesteads. With their small but hardy flowers of pink to dark-pink open faces, these early roses survived temperatures of -30 degrees, thriving as they did in their homelands of China and Japan. John Grasser’s gravesite in the Georgetown Pioneer Cemetery features this rose, planted at his burial in 1867, which continues to sucker (propagate itself) happily throughout the grounds with only scant rainwater for sustenance.

When asked to define a “rose,” most would describe their grandmother’s glossy-leaved, gorgeously perfumed, elegant hybrid tea roses, strikingly different than the pioneer rose. There are many different types of roses: the cluster-flowered polyanthas and floribundas, the Bourbons, the gallicas, climbers, shrub roses. These last are preferred in commercial landscaping because of their enhanced disease and insect resistance and need for less pruning. I like the aforementioned pioneer or “heritage” roses, because they also enjoy freedom from diseases like rust and black spot, and, at least in the cemeteries, seem to be less nibbled-upon by the deer.

Wise gardeners will ask for advice in selecting the right rose, but one should consider the following general rose requirements: at least six hours of sun each day (preferably morning sun),

February 11, 2015

deep watering once or twice a week, placement away from other plants so that the rose has air circulating through its branches, and proper planting in well-drained soil with a pH near neutral (7.0). This time of year, nurseries sell bare-root roses, a less expensive alternative to the potted plants available in summertime. Roses should be planted with the graft (the large lumpy joint where the base stock, usually a 'Dr. Huey' rose, is topped with another rose cutting) above or just under, the soil surface. The soil at the base of the rose should be bare in the rainy season, free of old leaves which may harbor over-wintering diseases or pests. In the summertime, when the shallow-rooted rose needs to conserve moisture, it's permissible to mulch the dripline (the circle of soil underneath the very edge of the plant) with compost or straw, but these should never rest against the trunk.

Check out Healthy Roses, a University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources publication (ANR #21589), which provides advice on growing roses without resorting to use of pesticides. After pruning during dormancy in late winter or early spring, spray with copper or lime sulfur (one or the other in alternating years) or try a 1-percent solution of horticultural oil (Neem) with four teaspoons of baking soda to one gallon of water. Any of these will protect the rose against fungus such as powdery or downy mildew, black spot and rust. One benefit of our drought is that these diseases thrive in moist environments and are not a problem during dry spells. Beware of overhead watering which dampens rose foliage and can result in fungal infection.

Pruning technique will differ depending upon the type of rose. Teas require a rather severe pruning of one-half to one-third of the previous growth, leaving only three branches. Conversely, the old heritage roses just need gentle shaping and removal of dead or crossed branches, dead leaves and hips (the rose's last-year seed pod).

Timing of rose pruning in our county is critical. If you want to learn the "whys, whens, and hows" of growing beautiful roses, join UCCE Master Gardener Eve Keener at the free Rose Pruning class this Saturday, Feb 14, 2015. This class will demonstrate proper rose pruning techniques at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m., located behind Folsom Lake College El Dorado Center, 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville. What could be a better activity for Valentine's Day than to celebrate the durable, beautiful rose? (Rain date is Saturday, February 21, same location and time).

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at the office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.org/Master_Gardeners/ and you can also find us on Facebook.