

Organic Approach to Growing Beautiful Roses (May-1-2007)

By: Herb Zipper, Rose Breeder, Horticultural Judge, Consulting Rosarian

Hello fellow rosarians! Greetings from Florida. The roses here in southeastern Florida are magnificent. There is nothing so welcomed by most roses as not to have to face winter. There is nothing so frustrating to a grower than to see varieties that he cannot grow in his northern garden produce such an abundance of wonderful blooms here. So, now that you have heard my lament, let's talk about growing great plants on Long Island and let's see if we can do it as safely as possible.

Think back to last year. Did you have any special problems? Did you have a situation where a particular group of roses growing together did not do well? Or, did you have the case where one rose plant grew well and the one beside it did poorly? In the first case, test the pH of the soil and, perhaps, do a soil test. In the second case, just shovel prune. While roses are not inexpensive, it still doesn't pay to go through the trouble and expense of bringing a poor plant back.

1. Clean and sharpen all your pruners.
2. Obtain the catalogs from Rosmania, Gardens Alive, Eden Science and other catalogs that interest you. Go through your ARS magazines for additional ideas.
3. Check out your sprayers. Make sure that they will give you a fine spray. Consider buying one of the battery-operated sprayers. Rosmania has a good one for about \$135.
4. Check out your watering systems.
5. Buy two/three cubic foot bags of mulch and bags of composted cow manure. If you can get fresh manure, be sure to let it age for at least three or four weeks. Have on hand 5-10-5 or 10-10-10 dry fertilizer, bags of alfalfa meal or pellets and Epsom salts (MG).
6. If you like to foliar feed with an end-hose sprayer, make sure the sprayer is clean and working well. You can use Peters, Schultz or Miracle-Gro. In addition, buy some sea products like fish emulsion, liquid seaweed or kelp. Any, or all, are great to add to your beds.

Now we are ready to grow great rose plants. As I am basically a lazy gardener with a back that has grown less forgiving with age, I look for the simplest ways to get good results.

1. Get a sturdy 8-ounce plastic cup and broadcast your fertilizer, MG and Alfalfa around your plants beginning in early May. Then water, water and water again. No need to scratch anything into the soil. The water will take care of everything.
2. Put down a good two-inch layer of manure. If you have compost, put it on the manure. Stop worrying about the bud union. Many of my bud unions are almost a foot under the manure and mulch and the plants are fine. Finally, mulch your beds with pine bark or cedar bark.

3. Three to four weeks later broadcast more fertilizer and alfalfa. Hold off with another treatment of Epsom salts until September. Once again, watering in the additives is all that is required. It goes without saying that your beds should be WELL WATERED, but not flooded! You know your soil, the vagaries of the weather and must determine a watering schedule based on those facts.

4. When it comes to liquid sea products, you can dilute them in gallon pots and pour around the plant, or you can foliar feed. Set up your own schedule once a month or every two weeks. The same holds true for whatever soluble fertilizer you choose.

So, now we come to pest control. About ten years ago I began to cut back on insecticides and miticides, and now I am at the point where I use none. I do order in beneficial insects, such as lacewings, trichogramma larvae, lady bugs and beneficial nematodes. The result has been no mite damage at all with only moderate insect damage from midge. As far as other insect damage is concerned, I grow bushes that are vigorous and make loads of blooms so that a little damage is an acceptable trade-off.

On the other hand, fungus damage can really ruin a plant even to the point of death. There are many fungicides on the market. Their LD-50 is very high. This means that you would have to drink the stuff to get sick, BUT are they all potential carcinogens? Will we eventually find that the incidence of various cancers is higher among those who spray than those who do not? I'd rather be safe than sorry.

Now that I have made you worry, what do we do? Well, here's what I recommend:

1. Look for plant varieties that are disease resistant.
2. Seek out earth-kind varieties
3. Use materials such as Green Guard (harpin protein), Serenade Solution (bacillus subtilis), Sulfur Guard, Soap Shield (copper in a fatty acid suspension) and Remedy (potassium bicarbonate).