

Responsible, Organic, Simple & Earth-Friendly

It's Not Your Fault!

How many of us have purchased a rose, brought it home, cared for it well for a few weeks and then watched helplessly as it slowly died before our eyes? Following this scenario is usually the all too familiar: "I just can't grow roses." Unfortunately, this is the dilemma facing many Americans when it comes to growing roses. "It's not your fault!" It has to do with the way the rose was grown before it came to you.

Dependence

We are easily taken in by a perfect looking rose bush with giant robust blooms and not a blemish in sight. But, is this real? For example, a hybrid tea bush may have been grafted (budded) onto a one-year-old understock and then grown for another year while being fed a steady diet of synthetic fertilizers, fungicides and pesticides in order to grow and mature as fast as possible for market. After it is pulled from the ground, the rose either sits in cold storage for up to five months or is potted and continuously fed more chemicals until the new owner — you — takes it home. After carefully preparing the soil or container with the best available soil and amendments, planting the rose and mulching it well, it is heartbreaking, to say the least, to watch the rose die. Unbeknownst to you, the rose is now going through withdrawals. Because you are not offering your rose the same chemicals that made it grow fast and bloom so much, it is now going to break down. A rose on steroids is a fraud. It looks strong and healthy and performs on top for awhile, but in fact, in the long run it is not sustainable. This break down can actually take up to two years depending on how "dependent"

the rose has become on the heavy chemical diet it was fed before coming to us.

Some Do It Right

In all fairness, the above scenario describes a minority of commercial rose growing practices found amongst a few of the big box contract growers; which is why the majority of roses sold in today's market do not, in fact, end up on the burn pile but are instead able to provide many years of enjoyment to today's rose buyer.

Christian Bédard, who heads up the Weeks Roses hybridizing program, made it clear to me that their roses were not overfed — or overdosed — with too many chemicals because not only is it not cost effective to over-use fertilizers, but with California's dry climate, fungicides are not needed as much as they would be in other parts of the country. His use of systemic pesticides in the greenhouse are long worn off by the time their roses reach market. When asked about Weeks' test and trial growing fields, he said that no sprays or fertilizers were being used there in order to determine which roses were the most disease-resistant. He added that they use various treatments with caution on an as needed basis.

David Austin Roses also uses chemicals sparingly in the United Kingdom, as well as in the dry fields of Texas. They even promote their own blend of organic fertilizer for their customers to use. Today, many of the large growers are attempting to become more green by using IPM (Integrated Pest Management) whenever possible. It is definitely an encouraging sign of the times.



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Grafting

According to the horticultural department at Purdue University, the Greeks and Romans practiced the art of grafting as early as the 5th century B.C. Grafting appeared to be commonplace and was widely used on various types of trees and grapevines as a form of propagation. By the 2nd century B.C., citrus trees, such as lemon and citron, were being grafted together. The earliest written account of grafting comes from a treatise written by followers of Hippocrates around 424 B.C. In this treatise, grafting is described in such detail that anyone of that time period would have understood what grafting was all about. Theophrastus, who is considered the father of botany, also writes about grafting and techniques to help the process.

Grafting has not changed much over the centuries.

These weaker roses need more care from the grower even when budded. Ultimately, the divine intelligence of nature surfaces again when it comes to the differences between budded — grafted roses — and those grown from cuttings on their own roots. Even the largest commercial rose growers are beginning to offer many of their roses on their own roots, because not only do they know it makes for a much healthier rose, but public demand for own-root roses is increasing for these reasons:

1. Own-root roses may live more than 100 years, where a grafted rose will be lucky to survive 15 years with the best of care. If a grafted rose is reported to be 30 or 40 years old, chances are the root stock has died and the rose has established its own roots. All over Europe the practice is to grow roses by budding



all photos courtesy Pam Greenewald

Clockwise: A well maintained garden at Heirloom Roses, Organically grown roses at Angel Gardens and 'Queen of Sweden'

It has the advantage of growing a rose quickly and having larger blooms. The obvious reasons for grafting in commerce are not being disputed here. Most of the roses sold today are budded or grafted for various reasons. I am not against the practice of budding roses under certain circumstances, as when increased vigor is needed for a rose to reach normal proportions. It is an interesting fact, and important to note here, that many cultivars would never have made it to market at all if they were not able to be grafted; they are weaklings that would not grow well at all on their own roots.

in order to get a large plant faster, but then the bud union (or graft) is planted several inches below the soil, with the scion (the rose on top) being exposed to the soil in order to allow, and in fact encourage, the rose to eventually establish its own roots.

2. People who reside in cold climates are usually in favor of own-root roses because they are much more likely to withstand freezing temperatures. After having

to replace their grafted roses every year or two, some people become tired of treating their roses like annuals.

3. Own-root roses avoid many common diseases of the graft, such as crown gall, which is most common in grafted roses. Rose mosaic virus can also be avoided, which may be spread by the root stock.



A grafted rose.

4. Suckers from the root stock are non-existent in the own-root rose.

5. Roses in the south budded onto shallow-rooted 'Fortuniana' rootstock must be held up with rebar or they will blow over in the wind. The same rose growing on its own roots will be stronger with many basal breaks, and it will never need such

support. This allows us to avoid another maintenance chore.

6. Own-root roses are healthier having stronger immune systems. Roses grown from cuttings on their own roots may take longer to mature, but when they do they are much more resistant to diseases and pests because their immune systems have not been compromised.

Proof

These words from Francis E. Lester's book *My Friend the Rose*, published in 1942, says it best:

"If the rose since time immemorial has enshrined herself in the life and literature and affections of mankind without the benefit of sprays and super-salesmanship, surely the business of growing roses cannot be so complicated an undertaking. May it not be, after

all, a much simpler thing than we are led to believe? Do we not place more emphasis on the intricacies of rose growing and on difficult rose ideals than is for the good of the cause? Would it not be better for the interest of the rose lover and especially for the millions of potential rose growers in America who 'would like to grow roses if they weren't so hard to attend to,' if we told more of the simplicities of rose culture and of the old proved varieties? Why not talk less of our latest novelties, some of which are admittedly hard to grow, many of which are known to be short-lived and all of which have yet to prove their ability to endure for future generations?"

The famous rose authority Dr. Nicolas does not hesitate in *The Rose Manual* to emphasize the

"ill effects of the inbreeding which accompanies the plethora of modern hybridizations which has accelerated the seeming degeneration of the hybrid tea class, their weakness or lack of constitution, and all the hokum that has pervaded rose literature."

How very often we rose lovers have fallen victims to the appeal of highly colored photographs and extravagantly worded claims, only to find out after we have spent money, time and labor that they cannot compare with older, less expensive rose varieties under average garden conditions. How much greater must be the disappointment of the inexperienced amateur who makes his first rose venture with an inbred, short-lived novelty and whose ambition to grow roses may thereby be shattered.

The utmost credit is due the world's rose hybridizers for their patient work and for the unquestioned advances they have brought about in the search for disease-resistance, fragrance and quality of performance in our gardens. But the new rose grower should know that no rose is better merely because it is protected by a plant patent and that an "alluring illustration" made from a greenhouse-grown rose is no criterion for garden planting. At least in today's rose world, new roses are being grown in trial gardens all over the country in order to be more specific by regions as to claims of the virtues of the performance of a new rose. It still takes many years of growing these roses to determine their permanent value.