

Roses Thrive on Routine

By: Carla J. Zambelli

I am a zone six rose enthusiast. I live in suburban Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I planted my first rose bush with my father when I was nine or ten. The bush was a Hybrid Tea called John F. Kennedy (my father's favorite rose and still one of the most majestic white hybrid tea roses), and I have been in love with roses ever since. My roses are my obsession as well as my favorite garden element.

In my opinion, routines work as well in the garden as they do in the house. I have a few basics that would be my pleasure to share. Once you have established a routine in the garden for your roses, you will not be able to imagine how you could live without a rose or two. I personally have 51 rose bushes at last count!

Carla's Rose Basics:

I believe in good mulch for my roses. I only use licorice root, cocoa hulls (please note that cocoa hulls can grow a fuzzy layer of mold when it is damp, which is unsightly, but has never harmed my plants), or buckwheat hulls mulch. If I can't get licorice root, I look for a good triple-shredded mulch. I mulch twice a year: in the spring for the growing season, and in late fall to provide a winter blanket. In the spring, I remove as much as possible of the old mulch from the winter and previous summer, and apply approximately one-and-one-half to two inches of mulch everywhere. I want my roses to breathe, so there is an approximately five-inch magic circle from the base of my rose that only has a peat moss "jacket" (a jacket to me is peat moss only), but no mulch. In the late fall when I apply my second mulch dressing, it merely goes over the old mulch and covers the crowns of my roses.

As far as my soil goes, I follow the same routine every year. After I remove my winter mulch, I work the following ingredients into my rose and perennial beds: peat moss, dehydrated cow manure, cottonseed meal, green sand, dried blood, bone meal, and some iron sulfate. Minus the peat moss, you will find most of these ingredients in a granular rose food. Most of these granular foods and separate ingredients can be easily located at your local garden center or hardware store. For those who feel most comfortable with a pre-mixed granular, I would still strongly recommend also including an annual peat and manure dose. It is always important to keep your soil happy. Happy soil equals happy rose bushes!

After the "magical" mix is dug in, I apply a weak epsom salt tea to encourage new basal growth. I am always careful to use epsom salt judiciously because it is not a good thing to build up too much of a magnesium residue over time. When magnesium is built up past the essential mineral level, it can stunt growth instead of helping boost new growth.

Once my roses have shown me at least one and one-half inches of growth, I dig in a little pre-mixed granular. Then, I apply a little more peat moss and then my mulch. Also, whenever I have banana peels, I dig them into my rose beds. Banana peels are the true junk food of roses!!! They love the boost a banana provides from potassium and other elements contained within the banana and its peel.

As far as pruning, I have these thoughts: everyone should own a good pair of pruners used only for their roses and own a good, basic, descriptive rose book. Pruning is such a visual thing to learn, and that is honestly how I learned: descriptions, photos and diagrams. And keep those pruners clean!

I have a metal bowl and old toothbrush just for the purpose of cleaning my pruners. I mix a weak solution of bleach and very warm water in my bowl. I use the toothbrush to thoroughly clean my pruners. Then I rinse the pruners well under running water and wash them again with a little mild dish soap, rinse them again and dry them carefully.

When planting a new bush, I always dig my hole at least eighteen to twenty inches wide, and at least as deep. If the soil has a large proportion of clay, then I add sand, gypsum, sifted composted top soil, dehydrated manure and peat to break it up thoroughly.

The soil around my house had a very high clay content when I first started to plant my garden, but now I know it is decent, judging by my toadstool barometer - toadstools now grow when it rains for a couple of days straight. Toadstools and edible mushrooms only like to grow in good, rich soil!

When planting a potted rose, as well as a bare root rose, I have what I call my parfait theory. I visualize what a parfait looks like: layers. The bottom of my hole has sand, peat, soil, and a couple of chopped up banana peels. That is the first layer. Then I alternate layers of soil and peat until I reach the halfway point and I place my potted or bare root rose in my new hole.

If potted, I like my rose to be at the same level as it was in the pot, and if bare root, I like my crown (looks like a knob to me) to be at soil level. If planting a bare root rose, I am careful to make sure that the roots are supported from underneath with enough dirt, as well as being careful not to break, stress, or crowd the roots rather than enlarge my hole if necessary. Please note that if you are planting bare root, it is important to soak the roots 12 to 24 hours in a bucket of water out of the sun. I like to mix in a little concentrated Vitamin B-1 solution or a little liquid or water-soluble rose food to that bucket of water to give a little more of a boost. But I digress!

After I have reached my "halfway parfait" point, I water the rose and the hole a bit. I water in approximately one half of a gallon of water with B-1 or water soluble rose food mixed in. I do this to help cut down on potential transplant shock. The water should soak in quickly, and I finish off my parfait layers, alternating between soil and peat moss. My top layer is always peat moss. After the parfait is complete, I dig in about a quarter to one half a cup of a granular rose food in a circle around the bush, depending on the size of the bush and the directions on the package. Then I water in about another half gallon of water. Finally, I mulch well, leaving my five inch magic circle from the base of the plant. The magic circle is only peat at the top so my rose breathes properly.

Roses should ideally get a good solid one inch of water once a week. If I have just planted a bare root rose with no growth, I mist the canes with water at least once a day, preferably in the morning before the sun is high.

Except for new plantings, roses should be fed once a month as they are heavy feeders. The new plants are not fed again for five to six weeks after initial planting and feeding. Then they go on the regular schedule.

As the season progresses, I do keep my rose beds clean, discarding dead and fallen leaves, etc. I am a believer in preventive, albeit judicious, spraying. I only spray early in the morning (before 7 a.m.) to avoid causing my leaves to burn in the sun. I only spray once a week, and have learned if a rose is purported to dislike spraying (some Old Garden Roses and Rugosas come to mind), PAY ATTENTION! I have exfoliated a bush or two in my spraying career! Another "live and learn," I suppose.

For diseases like rust, blackspot and powdery mildew I alternate between Funginex® and Daconil®. For the pest problems like aphids and their ilk, I use Isotox® or Orthene®. If you don't want a separate spray for insects and a separate spray for disease, experiment with Orthenex, which has the best of both worlds. All of the products mentioned are by Ortho®. Dragon® also makes similar versions. For those who don't want to use overly strong chemicals to control things like aphids, try a horticultural oil spray or something with pyrethrums. Sprays with pyrethrums (Shulz's Houseplant & Garden Spraytm comes to mind) are the best things to control outbreaks of whitefly. When the weather gets too muggy, hot and humid I do not spray. I switch instead to a rose dust. That, again, is a combination product which takes care of bugs as well as disease. I wear a little mask so I don't inhale the dust.

I have also discovered that old wives' tales have some truth to them: banana peel is one example and pungent herbs are another. Plants in the edible allium family are repugnant to aphids. Planting chives and garlic in and around my roses along with lavender, rosemary, sage and thyme has dramatically cut down my personal aphid population. I still spray for the little green menace, but not nearly as often! Old wives say that parsley planted near the feet of roses makes your roses smell sweeter. I don't know if THAT is true, but hey! why ruin a good thing? - I do it anyway! I experiment every year with at least one new companion plant for my roses. If they crowd my roses or I don't like the effect, I simply move that companion plant to a new location! I don't like to ever waste a good perennial, bulb, shrub, or herb.

Well, there you have the thumbnail version of my rose routine. It works extremely well for me, and I hope I have helped. Happy rose gardening!