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Rosy Outlook Growing Roses Is Not As Difficult As It Is Often Portrayed. But It Does Take Know-how - And A Routine.

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By Alan J. Heavens, INQUIRER REAL ESTATE WRITER

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What is it about the rose that has sent good and bad writers through the centuries scrambling for quill pen and parchment?

"This bud of love, by summer's ripening breath" . . . "A rose has but one perfect moment" . . . "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet" . . . "A rose is a rose is a rose."

You get the picture.

Perhaps it's because poets depend so heavily on the rose for inspiration that some experts have tried to turn successful cultivation of the flower into something attainable only by a select few.

Nonsense, says Clair G. Martin, curator of rose collections at the Huntington Botanical Gardens in San Marino, Calif.

"Growing healthy roses is really not all that difficult," said Martin, author of 100 English Roses for the American Garden (Workman Publishing, \$16.95). "The major obstacle any rose grower must overcome is the years of brainwashing we have all received from so-called experts.

"Most rose books emphasize the difficulties: weeds, insects and diseases," Martin said. "While problems do exist, they are, for the most part, cosmetic and easily overcome with basic horticultural practices."

Carla J. Zambelli of Haverford agrees. Zambelli acknowledges that rose cultivation can be high-maintenance, but believes that the way to handle it is to establish a routine to care for the blooms.

"There's always unexpected stuff, like this will be a buggy summer because we had a mild winter," said Zambelli, who grew her first rose - a hybrid tea rose called John F. Kennedy - at age 9 or 10. "Caring for them takes a lot of work, but once you develop the routine, it's not all that difficult."

Roses will grow in just about every type of soil. Jill Barnard, a consultant for the American Rose Society in Shreveport, La., said roses thrive on a porous soil that holds moisture, air, and a balanced amount of nutrients to promote good root growth without damaging the plant's delicate root hairs.

What that means is digging a hole from 18 inches to two feet deep and blending a soil mixture of 50 percent native soil with 50 percent amendments - compost, aged manure and redwood mulch, she said.

There are many types of roses: bush, standards, patios, miniatures, Old Garden, modern shrubs, specie roses, climbers and ramblers, ground cover, and varieties that can be cultivated indoors.

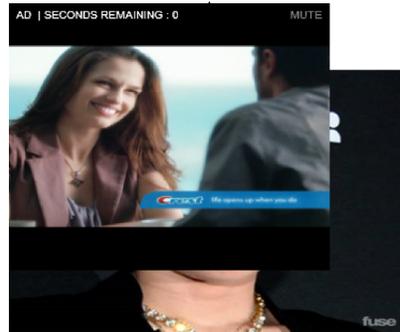
Several new roses appear on the horticultural scene every season. But this wasn't always the case.

Until 150 years ago, Old Garden Roses were the chief blooms of Western civilization. The ancient gallica was the red rose of the English House of Lancaster. The alba was the white rose of the House of York. The damask was brought to Europe by the Crusaders. Centifolias were the roses most often seen in the paintings of the old Dutch Masters. The moss roses evolved from the centifolias.

The chief characteristic of Old Garden Roses is that they bloom just once - in late May or early June - though the damasks often repeat a bloom in the autumn.

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Many of the roses at Wyck, the historic house in Philadelphia's Germantown neighborhood, are in the heritage category. The majority were introduced by Jane Bowne Haines, the mistress of the house, between 1814 and 1829.

Much of what blooms in the garden, of course, is roses propagated from the ones Haines planted. The oldest of the old roses on the property date from the early 1900s, according to Jeff Groff, Wyck's executive director.

By the Victorian age, China and tea roses had found their way west from Asia. They differed from the European roses in that they were "remontant," or repeat-bloomers, and had true crimson red flowers, according to Clair Martin.

At first, these roses were grown only in greenhouses, because the Victorians considered them tropical. Nurserymen soon discovered that they would tolerate the temperate climates of France and England. By 1840 - after some false starts - the first true hybrids of heritage, China and tea roses began to appear - Portlands, Bourbons, Noisettes and Hybrid Perpetuals.

The modern rose began with the introduction of hybrid tea roses in 1867, and includes floribundas, grandifloras, climbers, shrubs and miniatures, Martin said.

Knowing this, of course, can really impress your friends, but it will not help you grow better roses than your neighbor.

That comes with practice, said Zambelli, who grows 50 different roses in her garden.

"For instance, roses need to be fed once a month," said Zambelli, an amateur rose grower who often addresses horticultural groups on the subject. "That will make a big difference in how well they do."

Douglas Green, a Canadian nurseryman and author of *Tender Roses for Tough Climates* (Chapters Publishing Ltd., \$19.95), emphasizes that one of the chief considerations for growing roses is sunlight. Without at least six hours of good strong sunlight each day, the roses will not have the reserves to produce beautiful flowers.

"Their canes will be thin and weak," Green said. "Their susceptibility to disease will increase. Finally, their lack of vigor will leave them vulnerable to winter cold."

If your plant will get sun only early in the morning, when light is weakest, your rose will suffer, Green said.

What you plant depends on your taste and the amount of space you have. The selection of roses is almost endless - they fill catalogs, highlight flower shows, and are the centerpiece of nurseries. Professionals and books can provide helpful advice to the beginner.

When to plant depends on where you live. Autumn planting is recommended for bare-root plants. If you plant in the spring, you will need to keep the plants well-watered. In warmer climates, roses can be put in the ground year-round.

To prepare the soil for planting, Zambelli works in peat moss, dehydrated cow manure, cottonseed meal, green sand, dried blood, bone meal and iron sulfate. Most of the ingredients - minus the peat moss - are typically found in a granular rose food.

"After the magic mix is dug in, I apply a weak epsom salt tea" to encourage new growth from the base of the stem, Zambelli said. "I am always careful to use epsom salt judiciously, because it is not a good thing to build up too much of a salt residue over time."

Once her roses show at least an inch and a half of growth, Zambelli digs in a systematic fertilizer and insecticide. Then she applies a little more peat moss and mulches with licorice root, cocoa hulls and buckwheat hulls, and digs banana peels into the rose bed.

"Banana peels are the true junk food of roses," Zambelli said. "They love the boost a banana provides."

Zambelli mulches twice a year - in the spring for the growing season and in the late fall for the winter. She puts a layer of mulch no deeper than two inches and leaves a mulch-less "five-inch magic circle" of peat moss around the base of the plant so the rose can breathe.

Zambelli does not use pine bark mulch. While other rose growers do use it, she complains that pine bark is not free of mold spores and helps black spot disease spread among the plants.

For diseases such as rust, black spot and powdery mildew, Zambelli alternates between Fuginex and Daconil. For pest problems, such as aphids, she uses Isotox or Orthene.

"For those who don't want to use overly strong chemicals to control things like aphids, try a horticultural oil spray or something with pyrethrins," she said. Such sprays are also the best to use to control whitefly.

When the weather gets too hot and humid, Zambelli doesn't spray. She switches to rose dust, wearing a mask so she won't inhale it.

Zambelli has found that some pungent herbs are repugnant to aphids. Planting chives and garlic in and around roses along with lavender, rosemary, sage and thyme has dramatically reduced her aphid population.

Some of these herbs might qualify as companion plantings, which, among other things, give early color to a rose bed.

Lou Little of Vancouver, Wash., a consulting rosarian with the American Rose Society, said such plantings can provide harmony in the landscape, help soften the look of container-grown roses, create moods, or help define focal points in the garden.

For example, for red roses, plant yellow marigolds or white shasta daisies as companions. Yellow roses might look very nice when coupled with orange lilies or marigolds or blue salvia.

"When you choose companion plants, pay special attention to texture - to plant surface, edges, and leaf and flower shapes, especially in the winter," Little said. "Contrast the soft textures of rugosas with bold, open ones such as irises or lilies. Contrast the bold, coarse textures of hybrid teas with perennial geraniums, dusty miller, candy tuft and dwarf nandina."

One task beginning rose-growers fear most is pruning - the seasonal removal of nonproductive wood, the presence of which prevents a rose from doing its best.

Pruning should ideally be done in the frost-free portion of early spring. But there are no hard and fast rules - common sense is the best approach.

"Everyone should own a good pair of pruners used only for roses and have a good, basic descriptive rose book," Zambelli said.

"Pruning is such a visual thing to learn, and that is honestly how I learned: descriptions, photos, diagrams. And keep those pruners clean."

Some, like damasks, like to be butchered, Zambelli said, because they don't like old wood. Others require a gentler touch. But that knowledge comes from good rose books and experience, she said.

Growing roses may seem like lots of work, and rose growers readily admit that it is. But most suggest that growing roses is not something limited to a select few.

"Horticulture is no mystery," Martin said. "If a rose is provided with good soil and adequate sun and water, spaced properly, and given simple care, it will flourish with ease."

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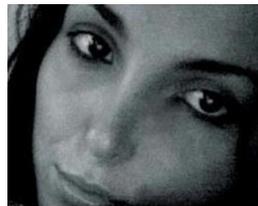
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