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How to Grow Beautiful Roses: Six Basic Steps to Successful Rose Gardening

By Mike Chute

You do not need to be a mystic or an alchemist to successfully grow backyard roses. Nor does planting a rose garden require an extra green thumb. Most rose failures can be traced back to fundamental mistakes that are preventable once you know what they are. Roses have essential requirements and by following these six basic steps, successful rose gardening is not only possible, but also easy, enjoyable, and highly satisfying.

1. Select Good Plants

There is a perfect rose for everyone and the trick is to discover which type is best for you. Decide what you expect from them and how much care you are willing to provide. Buy roses from respected local sources that specialize in roses and other plants. These nurseries and garden centers are in the plant business and sell quality roses. They should be able to render advice on plant care and assist you if there is a problem. Roses from these sources are usually graded “Number 1,” which is the highest grade in their industry and come from reputable growers. Plan to spend a little more on these plants but their size and overall quality more than off-set the difference in price. It is true that cheaper roses are available, but they may be smaller and generally receive no care once they are placed on the sales table. You may find yourself spending the first season nursing along an inferior plant and at the end of the summer, when all is said and done, you have gained nothing. Superior roses are available by mail order, also. Buying mail order greatly increases your choices and the plants arrive in excellent condition ready for planting.

Tip. Top grade Number 1 roses have at least three strong, healthy canes 5/16 in diameter with a fully developed root system. Number 1.5 is the same as Number 1 but with two strong canes instead of three and offers good value when sold at a discount. Buy nothing less.

2. Start with Good Soil

Everything begins with the soil. The native soil in Rhode Island where we live is “sandy loam” which is almost perfect for roses. Sandy loam drains very well but may not have enough of the organics that roses need to be ideal soil. This is not a problem; we can build our own by adding organics such as compost, horse manure, or seaweed, all of which are available locally. These amendments are necessary, not so much for nutrition, but for soil conditioning. They hold water, buffer the soil against wide swings in pH, promote the growth of important microorganisms, and generally improve the tilth of the soil. Mixing your garden soil fifty-fifty with these organic amendments is a simple and effective method of building great soil for roses.

Ideal pH for roses is a slightly acidic 6.5 to 6.9. Roses will tolerate pH down into the low 5's, but beyond that, they become malnourished even with nutrients present in the soil. This extreme acidity prevents roses from absorbing these nutrients. Our New England soil is naturally acidic, but this can be overcome with pH monitoring and adding lime to the soil when necessary, particularly in the fall as it takes several months for any change in pH to take place.

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Tip. Horse manure can be used fresh and need not be aged. There are plenty of sources for horse manure in New England and stables are glad to be rid of it for a nominal charge or, in many cases, free for the taking.

3. Plant in a Sunny Location

Shrubs that flower heavily need sunlight. Roses require a minimum of six consecutive hours of daily sunshine to optimize their flowering capabilities. Rhode Island may be called the *Ocean State* but it's amazing how many trees there are, even in the urban areas. There isn't any substitution for sunlight but if you have a shady yard, try growing roses in containers. This way they can be moved from place to place gaining additional sun exposure.

Tip. Varieties that have fewer petals in the bloom will tolerate shade more than heavily petalled roses.

4. Roses Love to Drink

Roses require water and plenty of it. It is difficult to over-water roses planted in amended sandy loam. How much is enough? The old rule of thumb is one inch per plant per week, but that is vague and doesn't take into consideration soil types, compositions, temperatures, and humidity. Check the soil at the base of the rose to make sure that it's moist and avoid letting it dry out completely. In cooler weather, water a once or twice per week. In the heat of the summer, everyday is not too much.

Tip. It is much better to give the plant a deep soaking, 4-5 gallons, twice per week than to lightly water everyday.

5. Fertilize Frequently

Flowering shrubs like roses have high nutritional requirements, which necessitate regular feeding all season. Commence fertilizing when new spring growth reaches an inch or more, usually around the first of May. Feed large roses a third of a cup of 10-10-10 monthly through August (4 feedings), then stop. For miniature roses cut the regimen in half. 10-10-10 is a balanced fertilizer that provides the essential elements of nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium that roses need for robust health. It is inexpensive and available everywhere. Augment this with water-soluble fertilizers applied at the recommended rates. Specialty fertilizers with trace elements are good, but not essential. Roses can't read and they eat anything.

Tip. Cutting the dosages in half and feeding twice as often is a superior method of fertilizing if you have the time.

6. Managing Insects & Diseases

Insects can be controlled as they appear with a variety of methods. Try adding companion plants – other species of flowers, herbs, other shrubs - whatever you like. This attracts more beneficial insects and adds color and variety. Control of fungal diseases, on the other hand, needs to be preemptive as blackspot spores, for instance, are present on the foliage before the black spots occur. There are spray products available in garden centers that effectively control all the common fungi in the home rose garden. Follow the instructions carefully and apply at the recommended rates.

An alternative to this is to plant varieties that have a demonstrated resistance to disease and maintain a clean garden with ample air circulation. Disease resistance has become a primary objective of modern rose hybridizing and resistant varieties are introduced every year.

Tip. Attack Japanese beetles in the larva stage in the soil with milky spore or lawn care treatments. This takes time but works. In the meantime, spritz the blooms with Windex.

The next time you buy roses, put away your ouija boards and tarot cards and send Merlin back to Camelot. If you follow these six basic steps to successful rose gardening then you can grow good, no, make that very good, roses in you own back yard.