

POOR DAVID'S ALMANAC

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"The only dumb question is the one that's never asked."

Getting Started With Roses – Volume I

It wasn't that long ago that I planted my first rose. Covered with mud, I remember staring down at the plant and thinking, "Is this going to work? Will this plant live?" Nope. It died. And after other failures, I joined the Denver Rose Society to learn how to do it right. The next time, again covered with as much dirt as I'd placed around the plants, and with my new copy of "*Growing Roses in Colorado*" soggy with mud, I planted several roses. This time, they lived. And now I have over a hundred of the things, and may have to tear down our house so I can plant more. So while I'm miles from knowing it all, I thought I'd share some of my lessons with our new members who are trying to learn. I'll cover starting a new garden, then talk about how to care for recent plantings, along with roses you may have inherited if you've moved into a house that already has some.



These articles should be used in conjunction with the more complete information in the copy of "*Growing Roses in Colorado*" you receive when you join the Denver Rose Society as a new member. In addition, you have access to our network of Consulting Rosarians here in Colorado, those of us (I'm one) who are certified by the American Rose Society to answer your questions by phone or e-mail. And our monthly meetings are a great opportunity to ask questions.

New Gardens

Yes, it's early February, but the time to get started with planning is now. What is your dream? A single rose bush by itself, or a border along a sidewalk with several roses? An entire garden devoted to roses? (That's what I did.) Measure the space and draw it out on paper. Calculate the square footage. Try to plan the space so you never have to walk in the garden to reach the plants (which compacts the soil - Bad Thing). Consider raising the level of your garden above ground level (more on this below). Two key ingredients in your plan when you're just starting out are:

Secret Tip—Roses do their best with at least 6 hours of sun each day. Less sun usually means smaller plants, fewer flowers and worse health. And roses don't like competition from tree roots. Place your garden accordingly.

Secret Tip—Leave enough room between the plants! Crowded roses become prime targets for insect and disease problems, and facilitates their spread. My gardens suffer from this in places, and it causes extra work. Do your best to study the plants you're considering, and try to learn how tall and wide they'll get. Leave at least 2 ft between minis, 4 ft between most others; even more between larger shrubs.

Once the ground thaws enough to dig, my advice is to brush the cobwebs off your shovel and get started! In my opinion, the single best thing you can do to succeed with roses (after locating your garden properly) is to prepare good soil for them to grow in. A good garden soil teems with a diversity of life; from bacteria to fungi to earthworms, and the sooner you prepare it, the more developed it will be by the time we plant in May. So, the first step:

Secret Tip—Check the drainage, as outlined in “*Growing Roses*.” Most of us here in the Denver area have a heavy, compacted clay soil that drains poorly, and flooded rose roots shut down and die. There are also areas of sandy soil around, where water drains all too quickly, and of course dried-out rose roots also die. *Next step, very important:*

Secret Tip—Get a soil test. Don’t ignore, don’t assume, don’t guess. Find a local garden center that can test your soil for things like nutrients and pH. Then dig up a sample from a couple or three spots, bag it and have them test it. They’ll tell you what’s good or bad, and can advise you on how to fix anything that is way out of whack. For a more thorough test through the mail, contact the Colorado State University Extension Service. Armed with the results of your soil test, you are now ready for the next step:

Secret Tip—The simplest and often best solution for most soil problems is the addition of organic matter. A lot of organic matter, like, the addition of 30 or 40% to the soil you have now. This will improve the flow of oxygen and water drainage in dense clay soils, as well as aid water retention in porous sandy soils. It can also help correct many pH problems and nutrient deficiencies. The organic matter feeds the soil organisms that in turn will help make your roses thrive. The “growing” of a good soil takes time, so the sooner you start, the better.

Here in the Society, we’ve probably used just about every form of organic matter there is to prepare our soils. I like to use compost, either home-made or bagged for small projects, or bulk from a local garden center for a big garden. Compost offers a variety of materials and textures that help break up my nasty clay soil. The loosening of compacted clay soils, then the addition of compost adds up to a lot of extra dirt, so I like to use raised beds to help contain it, built from everything from treated lumber to landscape blocks to raise the garden level 6 to 10 inches. This helps drainage (or water retention as the case may be), lessens the amount of left-over material, and offers a different design element in the yard.

I strip and discard the sod, then dig deep, both for drainage as well as root space—18” to 20”, deeper if my back co-operates, or I hit unwanted invading roots. I break up dirt clumps, remove and discard fist-sized and larger rocks, along with roots, dog bones, old construction materials, etc., but keep any pirate treasure I find. The bottom few inches of clay is usually of a lighter color and poorer quality; if any soil gets discarded from the project, this is it. One caution: If you use a rototiller, don’t overdo the tilling until the soil becomes like powder. Uneven pieces help prevent re-compaction. Then I layer in soil and compost, mix with the shovel, water in well, and continue mixing layers with watering until done.

Following this principle, if you are planning a single hole for a single rose plant, then make it a Big Hole—like 24” wide, 15” to 18” deep, larger if you can. This improves drainage, and allows the plant room to mature and thrive before the roots encounter any surrounding, poorer soil. The first rose I planted died because the hole was too small and I didn’t add enough organic material. Plus, the rose was of poor quality, but we’ll cover that next month.

Secret Tip—The best garden soil is composed of up to 50% air and water. That much? Yes! And this space does not come from your spade work, since newly prepared soil settles with time and watering (watering breaks down unnecessary air pockets, plus water weighs 8 lbs per gallon—think about what 10 gallons of water does to newly turned soil). Instead, networks of tiny spaces are developed over time by all the living organisms at work in your soil. This allows oxygen and water to enter, and is the best kind of environment to turn hungry and thirsty rose roots loose in.

Magic Formula—The more you do below ground for the plant parts you can't see (the roots), the better the parts you can see (the flowers) will do. And don't just take my word. Ask around, assemble advice, then grab your shovel. Does this sound like a lot of work? Depending on the size of the project, it can be. But let me make this promise: the research and work you put in to build a good garden environment now will be repaid many times over the next few years.

Existing Gardens

If you have some roses already, either old or recent, here's what to do in February, or as soon as the snow is gone:

1. Clean! Go out on a decent day and strip off all the old leaves, and carefully clean up leaves and debris from the ground around the plants. This will remove a lot of disease spores and insect eggs, and may be the single best thing you can do for your existing roses this Spring. Dave's Golden Rule: Cleanliness is next to healthiness. And wear good gloves when you do this. I've discovered that rose prickles do not take the winter off.
2. If you've moved into a house with an established garden, consider getting a soil test at a local nursery so you know where you stand with your soil.
3. Check for water. Dig down 3 or 4 inches in several places and feel the soil. Moist? Dry? More roses are lost during winter for lack of water than anything else. Water, if needed, and keep checking as temperatures warm this Spring, since watering needs change as the days lengthen and temperatures warm.
4. Mulch. Does your garden have a good 3 inches or more layer of mulch over the soil? Mulch can help hold in water, and limit winter damage at the base of plants. In my gardens, the most damaging time is starting right now—the freeze/thaw cycles. Warm, sunny days and nights above freezing encourage the plants to leave dormancy—canes swell with water, new growth (up to 90% water) sprouts, and then Wham! Several days with lows near zero, highs in the 20's. (As a mail carrier, I hate these cycles, too!) New growth and some healthy canes freeze, cells burst and die. A plant that looks fine in January develops black patches and dead canes by April. This is a normal part of Denver's climate; the best thing you can do is to protect the base of your plants, particularly if the varieties and hardiness are unknown, with a good mound of mulch around the bottom of the plant. If the base is healthy, the plant will rebound in the Spring when we prune. And speaking of pruning—
5. Don't prune! It's too early. Cutting a healthy green cane can signal the plant to start growing, and right now that's a Bad Idea. You want them to stay dormant. If you have broken canes, cut them at the break to keep them from whipping around in the wind and damaging healthy canes, but otherwise, don't cut anything. We'll cover pruning later, and do it in early May, when the danger of frost passes.
6. A word on snow. Snow makes a great accessory mulch. Snow covers the plant bases, and helps protect them from extreme temperatures. And although snow often does not contain much moisture, it does help water the garden as it melts. However, heavy, wet snows can break canes that still have a lot of leaves on them, so in future years, consider stripping the plants as soon as they go dormant and the leaves droop, usually by mid-November. But overall, snow's great, as long as your soil drainage is, too.

Next Article—You have planned, dug, and sweated over your new garden. Now let's talk some more about the plants that are going in it! Also, in my garden, some of my rose plants look like they are ready to sprout new growth. Is this a good thing, or a bad thing?