

GROWING ROSES IN CONTAINERS

BY CAROL MACON, CONSULTING ROSARIAN

The best place for a rose plant is outside, in full sun, in the ground. But often there are reasons why a variety cannot be given a spot in your garden. Chief among those reasons, at least in our area, is that a particular rose that you wish to grow is too tender to survive the winter outside. This is true, for instance, of all tree roses grown in the Rocky Mountain region. Other reasons might be that your garden is the site of nightly (or even daily) deer banquets, and/or you may wish to place a rose plant as an accent in an area on your property that is not plantable earth—a patio or a porch. Before you proceed with the container culture of roses, you should have a very specific reason why you wish to do so, because growing roses is a lot easier when they are in the ground. Our reasons for using containers were several; we like the landscape accent provided by tree roses, we love certain tender hybrid teas and floribundas, particularly those that we know will show well, we need to evaluate new varieties before giving them precious space in our overly full garden, and often, we order plants that are too small to plant directly into the ground.

Unless you want to treat your container rose as a very expensive annual, you will need to have a place to put the container for the winter where the rose can go dormant but not freeze. This is especially critical for a tree rose because the bud union of a tree rose is on a stem, termed a standard, in the air, unprotected by the warmth of the earth. Also, the soil in any container will freeze solidly if the container is left outside, killing the plant's roots. Ideally you'll have an unheated garage that is surrounded by your home, or a heated garage in which you can assure that the temperature will remain below 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Another consideration is light. The warmer your garage, the more light the plant should have; if it cannot go completely dormant, it will continue to grow, and light is a necessity in that case.

Your plant will shed leaves during the winter, and you'll need to dispose of these regularly. You'll need to water garaged container roses once a month or as needed, but don't over-do; the idea is to encourage dormancy. Aphids and mildew will attack garaged roses; you'll need a plan for dealing with them. Spider mites are a concern, especially for miniature roses. Every potted mini we have ever tried to bring through the winter in the garage has succumbed to spider mites because we're not around to hose off the undersides of their leaves or to make sure the small pots do not dry out. (It has been reported that potted miniatures can be successfully over-wintered buried with a few inches of soil over their crowns in the ground in a cold frame or under a layer of pine branches, but we have never personally tried to bring them through that way.) Before garaging your rose, spray for insects and disease and heap mulch over the bud union. Never prune your potted rose before garaging it for the winter. The plant will need every bit of the food stored in its stems to



photo courtesy of David Austin Roses, 'Grace'

make it through the six months it will be away from the sun. Our container roses go into the garage in mid to late October and see the light of day again in mid-April. Starting at the beginning of April, we open the garage door all day when temps are above freezing, to allow the plants to gradually readjust to outdoor light.

You will need a way to move your container back and forth. A dolly is very useful for this purpose. We used one until our collection grew to the point that we graduated to plywood platforms outfitted with wheels and pull ropes, large enough to hold up to six containers each. Your rose will begin to send out new growth while still in semi-darkness; therefore, this new growth will come in weak and spindly. It will need to be pruned away when you move the plant outside in the spring. Being moved outside again will shock your plant, so try to make that move in mid-to-late afternoon on a cloudy day. Put the plant back into the garage if frost threatens. The move outside is the point where most losses of garaged roses occur. We



photo courtesy of Jackson & Perkins



CSU Extension, 'Ballerina'

loose one or two every year, most often the less established ones. Some roses, especially those with weaker constitutions, cannot take garaging at all, and will die when placed inside. This year's immediate loss for us was a #2 Margaret Merrill.

CHOOSING ROSE PLANTS:

You are probably realizing by now that growing any rose in a container should be regarded as somewhat of an experiment, and you'll do better with more vigorous varieties. The best variety we have grown in a container is Moonstone, which is not only very vigorous, but is also insect and disease resistant. It produces large, picture-perfect roses in three bloom cycles a season, and has the happy habit of regularly winning Queen at rose shows. In any event, you'll want to choose a plant that is quick to repeat. Roses in containers draw attention, and you'll want yours to be in bloom as often as possible. Our Iceberg tree roses were never out of bloom all summer long, and Iceberg is one of the best varieties to be cultured as a tree rose. Playboy also is never out of bloom. Finally, any rose you choose to grow in a container should have been budded with the graft as close to the roots as possible. Space is very precious in a container, and, as you want to have the bud union resting at ground level, a long-shanked plant would require a deeper container than a compact plant. (Obviously, this does not apply to tree roses.)



'Orange Sunblaze' miniature rose

CHOOSING CONTAINERS:

Use a 12-inch container for small plants, 15 inches for floribundas and small hybrid teas, and 18 inches and up for larger hybrid teas. All tree roses should be in 18 inches or larger containers. The dimensions are measured across the mid-section of the container from inside rim to inside rim. Choose containers that provide for the inverted vase shape of rose roots. The container should be as deep as possible; at least as deep as the container is wide. The lighter the container, the easier it will be to move around. The sturdiest containers, although not the most stylish ones, are black plastic nursery pots, particularly those that are designed to hold young trees. Do not use clay pots without also using a plastic liner; soil dries out very quickly in clay pots on hot days.

MIXING POTTING SOIL:

Again, the lighter the container, the easier it is to move around. We use SuperSoil (tm) because it is very lightweight. The Super Soil for each container is mixed in a wheelbarrow with one tablespoon to two tablespoons of a soil-wetting polymer such as Soil Moist. Follow directions on the polymer's container regarding the amount to use for your container's size. Add water to moisten the mixture thoroughly.

PLANTING:

A layer of medium sized bark chips is placed over the holes in the bottom of the container, and this layer is covered with 1 inch of the soil mix. One cup of Mile Hi Rose Food is spread on the soil mixture and that is covered with another ½

inch of the soil mixture. Then plant the rose as you would plant it in the ground. Do not agonize over building a perfect cone beneath the roots, but the roots should be spread out in the container as much as possible. When you are done, the bud union of a bush plant should be at ground level, and ground level should be at least two inches below the rim of the pot. To accommodate these dimensions, you may need to trim the plant's roots a bit. It is always a good idea to give any rose you plant a bit of a root trim to encourage new root growth—emphasis on "a bit." Tree roses should be planted with the top of the root system two inches below the surface of the soil. Never put any fertilizer, liquid or granular, in direct contact with the newly planted rose's roots. This is a primary cause of "failure to bud out" and the death of young plants. Finally, water the container thoroughly, checking that its drainage is perfect.



'Red Flower Carpet' shrub rose

STAKING:

Provide a stake for each plant proportional to the mature size of the plant. Use soft ties to tie your rose to the stake. Old nylons work well, so does polyfoam coated wire or green garden tape. Miniature roses do not require staking; tree roses absolutely must be staked tightly to protect the standard. If the standard breaks, you've lost your tree rose.

FERTILIZING:

After your container rose blooms for the first time, you can begin to use fertilizer. Always follow package directions. We use Osmacote, a timed-release fertilizer, or a similar product, in our containers, supplemented with a liquid fertilizer every two weeks. In the spring of every year following, add one cup of Mile Hi Rose Food to your container when you prune your plant. This is a good time to also add other soil amendments, such as worm castings or compost. By refreshing your soil in this manner, you will prolong the life of your container rose, and avoid having to repot it into new soil for at least five years. Repotting is advisable when bloom production declines. Be aware that container grown rose plants do not have an unlimited life cycle. If the quantity and quality of the flowers deteriorate to an unacceptable level, your container rose may need to be replaced. At that point, you may want to try planting it out in the garden in the very early spring. It may live and produce for another summer, and the change of venue may encourage it to produce more bloom.



courtesy of Jackson & Perkins



courtesy of RoseMagazine.com
photograph by Irene Hannestad

WATERING, MULCHING, AND SPRAYING:

Water your container daily, preferably first thing in the morning. Water twice on very hot days, morning and evening. Never allow the pot to go dry. Spread an inch of mulch, such as small bark chips on the top of the soil in your container to help keep the moisture in the container from evaporating. Treat for insects and disease as you would if the plant were in the ground.

The following list of roses for containers is by no means exhaustive. The list is made up of varieties with which we have had success—they can take relative neglect for six months in a garage without dying, they can win awards in rose shows, they provide plenty of blossoms for rose arrangements and they are colorful garden accents. These factors, for us, justify the effort of growing the following varieties in containers.

HYBRID TEAS THAT DO WELL IN CONTAINERS:

- Belle (hybrid tea hybridized by martin hiltner)
- Black Magic
- Cajun Moon
- Cajun Sunrise
- French Perfume
- Gold Medal (grandiflora)
- Just Dreamy
- Just Joey (two, as tree roses)
- Marilyn Monroe, 2
- Mister Lincoln
- Moonstone, 2 (if we could grow only one rose in a container, this would be the one.)
- Signature, 2
- St. Patrick (one bush, two as tree roses)

FLORIBUNDAS THAT DO WELL IN CONTAINERS:

Angelface

French Lace (two, as tree roses)

Gingersnap, 2

Gruss An Aachen (as a tree rose)

Iceberg (two, as tree roses; both lost to construction last summer)

Lavaglut (as a tree rose)

Playboy (as a tree rose)

TREE ROSES THAT DO WELL IN CONTAINERS:

French Lace

Gruss An Aachen

Iceberg

Just Joey

Lavaglut

Playboy

St. Patrick

Tamora (A hardy shrub, it was too pretty as a tree rose to resist. The standard snapped halfway across its diameter. We taped it back together, and, to our amazement, it is still alive. We'll see if it produces anything this year.)

OTHER TYPES:

Pearl Palace, Laguna Palace - the only potted mini-floras or miniatures to ever reliably come through the winter in the garage for us. Most minis are winter-hardy, and should be planted in the ground. All of our mini garage deaths were due to spider mites, dried out pot soil or both.

Any plants too small to plant in the ground, i.e. First year maidens, new minis (plant out at 10 to 12 weeks), newly rooted own-roots, one-gallons and #2s

Any new hybrid tea with which we have no experience. We do not like to give garden room to unstudied/unproven varieties. (Both of the last two categories are planted in appropriately sized black nursery pots.)



'Lady Elsie May' shrub rose