

HOW TO CHOOSE A ROSE

By Carol Macon, Consulting Rosarian

As anyone who has ever been faced with a small mountain of garden catalogs every January knows, choosing a rose is not easy. First of all, there are a lot of them. The hybridizers have been hard at work, and dozens of new varieties come to market each year. Secondly, while it seems to me that, overall, roses are getting better and better as garden plants, especially in terms of hardiness and disease-resistance, this does not mean that inferior rose varieties are no longer coming to market. Indeed they are, and I shovel prune plants each fall that I planted with high hopes the previous spring, unwilling to pass the miserable things along to another gardener. Those that I, for one reason or another (mostly size, or the encroachment of shade), do give away, must at least be good garden plants, although they may be wrong for the place in which I planted them. In this case, I have lost time and money, because I chose a plant that, when mature, did not work in its designated place in my garden. Obviously, you need to know the mature height and width of any rose you plan to buy, and you must be able to give your rose at least 6 hours of sun a day.

This may be a simplistic statement, but, first of all, before you purchase a rose, you must **know why you want it**. Do you want long-stemmed beauties to arrange in a vase? Do you want a traffic-stopping vivid splash of color in the front yard? Do you want to hide a dead tree, add reliable color to a perennial bed, edge a walkway with plants that bloom all summer, plant a drought-resistant flower bed? Do you want to grow the next Queen of Show? Once you decide on the rose's purpose, you have automatically limited the field from which to choose. (This is the antithesis to my usual method of choosing a rose because I like its picture, or have fallen in love with a bloom in a greenhouse.)

Then, and this is the toughie, you should **know where you are going to plant the rose**. Like many another gardener of mature years and mature garden, I have limited space for anything new. In fact, every year, I plant roses in pots that sit on our driveway, because there is no room for them in the ground. Forty- two of them usually spend the winter in our garage. These facts do not stop me from ordering new varieties every year. Now, I ask you, how smart is that? The only saving grace of my method is that I can evaluate the new, potted roses during our summer season, and use the best ones to replace older varieties in my garden in the fall. (Yes, I plant potted roses into my garden in September.) This would work even better if I weren't so emotionally attached to those older varieties. I once had a strong (read hardy and vigorous) plant of Sutter's Gold that gave me five or six bloom cycles every summer. I took it out to plant show star Gold Medal, and I regretted losing Sutter's freely given color, which is why free-blooming, formless Mojave is still in its place in the hybrid tea bed, and will remain there. The Sutter's Gold is alive and well and annually delighting a friend near Palmer Park.

Now, assuming that you have a need for a new rose in your landscape, a specific need, for which you need a specific type of rose; and further assuming that you know exactly where this rose is to be planted; and, further, that you know what size rose the spot can accommodate, what's next? Obviously, because we live in Colorado, where winter temperatures can remain below zero for days and then scoot to 70 F, and where the growing season is short, **the two most important criteria for any rose are hardiness and vigor**. Without them, we won't have any rose for long. Our rose choice must have a reputation for living a long and happy life a mile or more high, and it must want to grow, i.e., it must be energetic in its rate of growth and production, each and every year. Now, granted that these factors are often unknown when a rose first comes to market, we still can make some educated guesses. If the rose is an All American Rose Selection, or an Award of Excellence winner, supposedly it has been tested for these qualities all over the country. It has been my experience, however, that the Rocky Mountain District has been slighted in the weight given to our opinion of any given rose by any

national testing entity. This is, I suspect, partly due to the fact that very few of us make those opinions known via the annual Roses in Review polls, and partly due to the fact that the rose companies know there are proportionally fewer rose growers out here. Be that as it may, we can still use the AARS and AOE designations as sometimes flawed guides. If you can wait a couple of years after a rose comes to market, its flaws, if any, will start to turn up in the annual polls, and a rating will appear for it in the annually produced HANDBOOK FOR SELECTING ROSES published by the American Rose Society. As a general rule of thumb, I try to buy only those varieties with a rating of 7.8 or above, which makes them above average roses. (There are exceptions to this, of course. My beloved Mojave's rating is 5.4. It is not supposed to be hardy, let alone the splendid 5' x 3' garden plant it has turned out to be. Every other Mojave I've planted has died.) **The most reliable guide to hardiness and vigor in a rose is its national origin.** Roses from Poulsen in Denmark, Kordes in Germany, Fryer and Austin in England and anybody in Canada, usually grow very well for me. In contrast, I have never managed to keep a French or South African rose alive much less happy. California roses are always iffy, and I tend to wait a year or two after their debuts to purchase them. How do you know the source of a rose? The first three or four letters of a rose's registered (not market) name are an abbreviation of the producer's name: Kor, Aus, Poul, Fry. And you know that by checking the New Rose Registrations section of your American Rose magazine. I firmly believe that any serious rose grower should belong to the American Rose Society. Membership can save you a lot of time, trouble and money.

The other criteria for selecting a rose are, in order of their importance to me (you may and should have your own scale), **disease resistance, fragrance, form, bloom cycle frequency, substance, petal count, plant size and drought tolerance.** These can sometimes be determined more by what is left out of a catalog description than by what is actually printed. Assume that if **disease resistance** is not mentioned, you'll need to spray for blackspot and mildew. Assume that if **fragrance** is described as light or not described at all, the rose has no fragrance. Assume that if **high centers or show form** are not mentioned, your rose is strictly for garden color and possibly, arranging. In that case, the plant should be a prolific bloomer, and the description should say so. **Bloom cycles** are dependent on weather and season length. Knowing what you can expect from a hybrid tea or floribunda is based much more on individual experience than it is for, say, an old garden rose which only has one early summer bloom, or a shrub rose, which will bloom heavily in spring, followed by fewer blooms thereafter, and maybe, a second flush when the weather cools in the fall. **Substance** generally refers to the thickness, texture, crispness, firmness and toughness of the petals. It is a function of the amount of moisture and starch present in the bloom. This is a factor in the bloom's ability to stand up to rain and other environmental stress, including insect infestation. It is also an important factor in the vase life of a cut bloom, and thus, its show worthiness. **Petal count** is usually included in a catalog description. Too few petals may mean a rose may open and blow quickly, making it useless for show. Brandy is a rose that has too few petals to hold its form. Conversely, too many petals may mean that the rose will never open here. Uncle Joe (Toro) is an example of a rose with too many petals to open well in Colorado. And it should be mentioned here, that a catalog's listing of the **height and width** of a rose is based on what the rose is capable of where it was bred. If the rose is a product of Oregon or California, it usually will not attain its stated height and width where the climate is more severe. Conversely, Canadian roses, for the most part, will grow as much as third to a half again higher and wider than they do in Ontario. Austin roses grow higher and wider here, and have fewer disease problems than they do in England. Many shrub and old garden roses are renowned for their **drought tolerance**, but catalogs generally have not caught up with the current importance of this quality in a rose, and seldom comment upon it. One noteworthy exception is the catalog of High Country Roses, www.highcountryroses.com, which sells drought tolerant roses. You may check on a variety's drought tolerance with your local consulting rosarian.

Now you know how to choose a rose. Just don't go falling in love.