Has your favorite rose plant suddenly changed this year?

Does it now send out long canes covered with red flowers in June, even if the flowers of the plant you originally bought were pink or white? Has this – this thing – outgrown its allotted space, with no sign of stopping?

What is this strange invader and why does it get so big?

GRAFTING: A TWO PIECE STORY

For over 100 years, it has been the common practice of rose nurseries to produce new rose plants by grafting a small piece of the desired rose, such as “Peace,” or “Hot Cocoa,” onto a different, more vigorous rose, called the “rootstock” or “understock.” Although labor intensive, this practice enables rose nurseries to produce saleable plants more quickly. So the majority of rose plants sold in the United States, especially Hybrid Teas such as “Peace” or Floribundas like “Hot Cocoa” are offered as grafted plants (two pieces joined) with the “named” variety (“Peace” or “Hot Cocoa,”) growing out of the rootstock at the “graft union”.

What does this mean for you? Grafted plants will grow in your garden just fine unless something happens to start the rootstock growing on its own (we call these growths from the rootstock “suckers”). This may happen because of improper planting, which leaves the “vulnerable” graft exposed to cold, wind, and the freeze/thaw cycles that cause havoc in our Colorado gardens. Once the original named variety dies or is seriously damaged, the rootstock may have no choice but to start growing on its own. In addition, lack of winter protection, lack of winter water, or physical injury to the named variety are other reasons for rootstock to appear. Or perhaps a stray root may grow too close to the surface and decide to send up a rogue shoot. Even if the named variety is still alive, once the rootstock gets well started, it will choke out the rose you bought, until all you have left is an unwelcome and overlarge stranger in its place. (For more information on proper planting and cultural techniques, please see other articles on www.denverrosesociety.org or consult our valuable book, “Growing Roses in Colorado,” available for purchase from the DRS or free with a new membership.)

THE GOOD DOCTOR

The most commonly used rootstock in the United States is an old rambler rose named “Dr. Huey.” Technically classified as a “Hybrid Wichurana” (don’t worry, no test on this!) “Dr. Huey” by himself can reach ten to twelve feet high and wide. It has been used as a rootstock (called “Shafter” in the industry) for the past 60+ years because it roots in the ground easily, grows quickly, and takes a graft well. Once it starts to emerge in your garden though, “Dr. Huey” will flower once, usually in June, then start growing larger again. The Doctor has flattish, dark red flowers with around 15 petals (known as semi-double). There is often some white in the center of the flower, and when it first opens, bright yellow stamens. You’ll find little or no fragrance. “Dr. Huey” is considered to be lightly thorned although anyplace you touch on the stem always seems to have sharp ones! “Dr. Huey” also has a strong affinity for powdery mildew, a fungal disease you don’t need to have in your rose garden.

THE INVASION OF THE ALIEN DOCTOR

Okay, you’ve decided from the pictures and descriptions that “Dr. Huey” is on the loose in your yard
("Dr. Huey" is the only doctor I know of that still makes house calls). So what do you do?

You have three options, all of them good.

1. It’s big, it’s taking over, it’s snagging shirts and flesh – “Dr. Huey” has gotta go. Great! Cut the canes down, get out your shovel and dig the base up (here in the Denver Rose Society, we call this shovel pruning). Key: dig up all of the roots! The Doctor can grow back, like a weed, from root pieces left behind. Then, re-amend the soil, and put in a new rose. Refer to our articles or “Growing Roses in Colorado” for more information, particularly on what depth to plant the graft union (the place the named variety joins the rootstock) in Colorado. Water, mulch, get back in your hammock.

2. The original rose is still alive and blooming; suckers from “Dr. Huey” haven’t choked it out yet, and you’d like to save it. Great! Dig around the “Dr. Huey” canes; follow them down under the ground until you reach the place they started from (at the roots). Key: rip them out (cutting may stimulate them to grow back). If they start from a root near the surface, consider tearing the entire section of root out (there’s a lot of other roots as that’s what “Dr. Huey” does best). Now, evaluate the overall plant. Is the graft union (the knot the canes come out of) above ground? Here in Colorado, it needs to be below ground. Consider raising the soil level around the plant, or even raising the level of the entire bed if there are several roses with grafts planted the same way. Now evaluate the canes. Are they new and healthy, or did a certain someone scrimp on pruning this year? That’s okay, I’ve done that too. But here’s the thing: If there are a lot of old winter-damaged canes on your above ground “named” rose, it is hard for the rootstock to push water and nutrients through the dead tissue (think of a clogged soda straw). This might be one reason the good Doctor decided to take off on his own: it’s easier than dealing with a clogged, damaged plant. Read our articles on pruning, then try cutting and evaluating your stems. Dead material in the center? Keep cutting. Flowers are not necessarily a sign of good wood. Roses are tough; they’ll flower even if they’re barely hanging on. Make it easy on the “partnership” of named variety and rootstock – cut to good wood. Watch your fertilizing and watering. Mulch. Make sure the original “named” variety is growing well and is happy and that will keep “Dr. Huey” down underground where he belongs! Then pour a new glass of lemonade and get back in your hammock.

3. Despite the disgraceful negative tone of this article concerning “Dr. Huey,” you like this rose, and want to keep growing it. Great! For several years after it was first introduced in 1920, “Dr. Huey” was considered our finest red climber. It has since been surpassed by many other varieties (such as “Improved Blaze,” “Don Juan,” and “Dortmund”, all repeat flowering), but if you want to grow the good Doctor, what it needs in order to do its best is **light** (at least 6 hours full sun), **space** (in our area, you can expect an arching shrub about 8 ft tall by 8 ft wide; if trained to a trellis or fence, it may get larger), and a **thoughtful pruning hand** (like lilacs, “Dr. Huey” has a single, year-long blooming cycle. You can remove dead wood whenever you spot it, but try not to cut the living wood until after the rose finishes blooming (usually July), to keep as many flowers as possible. Of course, if the long canes are attacking passers-by on the sidewalk, you
may have no choice.). And you’ll have to learn how to handle powdery mildew, which usually appears in the late summer and fall. But “Dr. Huey” is approaching its 100th birthday since it was introduced so it should do well for you.

**ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE TO THE GOOD DOCTOR**

In recent years, using new techniques, nurseries are offering more roses for sale on their own roots (a rooted cutting of the “named” variety called an “own-root” plant) all one plant, no rootstock. In most of our local nurseries, you’ll find that all miniatures, many shrubs (like the “Knockout” series), some climbers, and others, such as the winter-hardy Canadian roses, are sold this way. Even some Hybrid Teas and Floribundas are starting to show up on their own roots. Own-root roses often grow more slowly for the first few years, but are healthier and longer-lived in the long run. On the other hand, the popular Hybrid Teas and Floribundas are still easier for the high-volume nurseries to produce as grafted plants, to keep up with demand, and many varieties seem to grow better as grafted plants. So, the variety you set your heart on may only be available in one form.

What should you do? Simple: don’t worry about it. *Just buy the healthiest plant you can find,* no matter how it is produced. Key: ask at the nursery what you are buying. Own-root or grafted, and then learn to plant each type correctly. (A membership in the Denver Rose Society is how I learned to do this.)

Remember, grafted roses do great in Colorado, but knowing how to grow them properly is a great way to keep ol’ “Dr. Huey” down under the ground where he belongs.

If you have questions about your specific situation, please find the list of Consulting Rosarians elsewhere on the Denver Rose Society website. Contact one with your questions. We’re here to help!

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