

Growing Old Garden Roses

By Susan Camp

Our Old Garden Roses are almost asleep for the winter. One droopy, pink bloom still clings to the Old Blush (*Rosa chinensis*) and three tiny buds might open on the Autumn Damask (*Rosa damascena semperflorens*) in the next few days. In case you missed the first column, we planted Apothecary Rose (*Rosa gallica officinalis*) and Rosa Mundi (*Rosa gallica versicolor*), in addition to those mentioned above.

If the “Gardening Corner” column from two weeks ago piqued your interest in planting some Old Garden Roses, start researching now for spring planting. Look for reputable nurseries that specialize in growing Old Garden Roses. Read online reviews about each company’s plant quality, growth method, and shipping time reliability. We use few chemicals in our garden, so we wanted organically grown roses that would not be dependent on heavy doses of fertilizers and pesticides.

Select plants that will thrive in our climate. If you decide to wait another year before planting, the Norfolk Botanical Garden and the Leonie Bell Rose Garden at Monticello grow many varieties of Old Garden Roses that bloom between May and October. The Ben Lomond Historic Site rose garden in Manassas contains 160 cultivars of Old Garden Roses. The article “Heirloom or Old Garden Roses” from the VCE Piedmont Master Gardeners at <http://piedmontmastergardeners.org/heirloom-or-old-garden-roses/> provides information on several sites in Virginia where you can view Old Garden Roses.

Once you select the roses, decide where you are going to plant them. Roses like sunlight and freely moving air, which help to prevent fungal diseases. Obtain a soil test kit from the Gloucester Extension Office and send your sample to VA Tech, leaving plenty of time to amend the soil before planting in the spring. Roses like mildly acidic soil, with a pH of 6.0 to 6.5.

Dig a hole about two feet by two feet to give the roots room to spread out. Discard the less fertile soil from the bottom of the hole and replace with well-rotted manure. Putting the manure in the bottom of the hole will prevent burning of the delicate feeder roots. Add organic amendments to the soil, such as compost and worm castings and mix in one cup of bone meal. Several sites suggest 2/3 organic materials to 1/3 soil.

The roses will need water two to three times a week until well-established. Avoid granular fertilizer for the first year. Use a water-soluble fertilizer, such as a fish emulsion, every two to four weeks. Mulch your roses to conserve water, discourage weeds, and prevent soil compaction. Most types of mulch are satisfactory, but you may want to avoid mushroom compost or dust to decrease the risk of spreading a fungus.

Rose diseases and insect pests are not considered major problems for Old Garden Roses. These are plants that have survived for hundreds of years. Some continue to grow and bloom in old gardens despite decades of neglect. During the summer, I hand-removed several Japanese beetles from the Autumn Damask and sprayed neem oil (not the number one choice) on a small area of powdery mildew on the Rosa Mundi. I found some aphids on the swamp milkweed, but none on the roses. I was amazed, but I can't predict if they will be as healthy next year. They are roses, after all.

Several sources recommend not pruning Old Garden Roses for the first season or two, other than to remove spent flowers (unless you want the hips) and dead or damaged canes. Roses that bloom once a year should be pruned immediately after flowering, because they will bloom the next year on old wood. Some sites suggest defoliating the plants in mid-January to prevent overwintering of disease. If you remove the leaves, dispose of them by burning.

These are the basics for planting and cultivating Old Garden Roses. Our first year has been delightful. We are looking forward to seeing them grow and thrive for many years.

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