

A ROSE IS A ROSE!

The only truly successful rose garden I enjoyed was in another time and place: I merely picked them. They were cared for daily by my husband from 6AM until 7 while I took care of kitchen chores. The roses were hybrid teas and perfect! Decades later I do have roses, shrubs mostly, mostly healthy, a few with what Rosarian Joy Long calls 'early fall color'. Not elegant perhaps but easy care and greatly loved.

Today's roses are largely chemical free as people no longer want their garage shelf or tool shed to be a toxic waste site. Currently, hybridizers have developed wonderfully tough roses. 'Knock Out' is both inexpensive and ubiquitous and when the one I had was totally "voled", I salvaged cuttings that now brighten two corners of the garage. 'Knock Out' was hybridized by Bill Radler, a former director of the Boerner Botanic Garden in Milwaukee, Wisconsin who knew home gardeners needed a low-maintenance rose. Other roses have followed and people with no time for mixing and spraying are enjoying roses, as well as the staffs of public and business buildings.

According to the experts, two reliable sources of information about roses are the American Rose Society headquartered in Shreveport, La. and the Earth-Kind Rose Research Program. Both provide advice on buying and raising roses. The ARS (www.ars.org) runs the consulting rosarian program that provides free local advice. It is important that it be local as our country has such radically different environments. The ARS is also the source of expert rose judges for competitions.

Earth-Kind (earthkindroses.tamu.edu) is a program designed at Texas A&M Univ. that tests and identifies hardy roses that require very little maintenance. To date, 17 roses have been certified as being suitable for planting in Southern gardens. Currently the list includes 'Belinda's Dream' 1992, 'Caldwell Pink', 'Carefree Beauty' 1977, 'Climbing Pinkie' 1952, 'Ducher' 1869, 'Duchesse de Brabant' 1857, 'Else Poulsen' 1924, 'Georgetown Tea', 'Knock Out' 2000, 'Mme Antoine Mari' 1901, 'Marie Daly' 1999, 'Mutabilis', 'New Dawn' 1930, 'Perle d'Or' 1884, 'Sea Foam' 1964, 'Spice', and 'The Fairy' 1932.

The dates of introduction came from the ARS handbook listing and although it is claimed that the rose has been around for 34 million years along with the lotus and papyrus, you can see by the dates that many of those still loved today are way older than we are, even if not by a million years.

With all the attention concentrated on the elegant hybrid teas for several decades the older shrub roses were rarely seen. Their re-introduction by Graham Thomas and David Austin led to an appreciation of these stalwarts as valuable landscape plants. The English Roses bred by David Austin combine the flower forms and fragrance of Old Roses with the repeat blooming trait of Modern Roses. Also a boon to today's smaller garden and time-limited gardener are the Floribundas, a cross between a Hybrid Tea and the polyantha. Two Floribundas that do well here are 'Playboy' and 'Playgirl'. The boy is a red mix, with a lot of orange, the girl, a lively rose-red. As a plant, Floribundas are attractive with healthy foliage and a more compact shape than the Hybrid Tea.. For an example of a many-flowered polyantha, think 'The Fairy'-clusters of tiny pink roses, delicate foliage, supreme survivor skills.

Inspired by seeing them in Joy Long's garden I have 'Ballerina', a small Hybrid Musk shrub with white single blooms edged with pink, and a climbing miniature rose, 'Jeanne La Joie'. Every leaf was stripped from the climber by caterpillars but it is recovering nicely.

There is no way to choose a favorite as each is a delight in a different way. Aside from being easy to care for, we want them to smell like roses, survive whatever the climate sends and last for years. Rose growers continue to fill that bill of particulars. I have a new pair of yellow carpet rose (that seems to be their only name), and they seem undeterred by the June heat wave.

If you are a novice rose grower, be sure you have six to eight hours of sun in that selected spot. One shrub, 'Sally Holmes' will bloom in semi-shade, slim apricot buds opening to wide white single roses with long golden stamens – lovely. Good drainage is essential and a pH slightly acid 5.6-6.6. Don't crowd them as good air circulation keeps black spot and mildew at bay. When you water early in the day, water the roots, not the foliage. Two or three inches of mulch is ideal: pine straw or pine bark is good – avoid that dyed stuff- these are roses you are planting, not gnomes.

When possible, buy a rose on its own roots. If the top dies on a grafted plant, what comes up from the rootstock is not what you ordered. I lost one last winter but haven't dug it out because what appeared is a pretty dark red single rose and because I haven't gotten around to it!