

Roses for Romantics

Such a fine coincidence, Valentine's Day and Thursday! We may not be sure if there was a St. Valentine or, even if there were, that he befriended lovers. We are sure we need February 14th with its red hearts, preferably chocolate centered, and its roses to remind us how fortunate we are to have people to love. Additionally, all that advertising is a boon to husbands prone to forget the dates of anniversaries and birthdays.

For a gift that has no calories and lasts longer than some romantic relationships, buy a rose! Place an order from the plentiful catalogs or use a gift certificate. This year's new roses are designed for lovers with evocative names, i.e. 'April in Paris' and 'Lovestruck'.

The former, the Jackson & Perkins "2008 Rose of the Year" winner, is a fragrant hybrid tea descended from 'Pristine' and 'New Zealand' with pale pink petals edged in a deeper pink. J & P offers it on its own roots, a preference of many rose growers. When you lose the top of a grafted rose what comes up from the root stock is not a rose you want to keep. 'April in Paris' also comes as a tree rose if your Valentine impulses run to extravagance.

Like grandbabies, all roses are beautiful and if you find the care of a hybrid tea too demanding try floribundas. 'Lovestruck' is a charming pink floribunda, also a J & P designated winner. Floribundas are lovely plants, less gangly than their more glamorous sisters. The 'Lovestruck' bloom is deep pink with a pale reverse on a compact, vigorous plant with excellent disease resistance.

The 2008 All America Rose Selection (AARS) winner is floribunda 'Mardi Gras'. According to the catalog explanation, this vivid rose/pink/orange/gold has both vigor and disease resistance. The foliage is semi-glossy and the plant grows to 4'. To cool a bed of these beauties, white would suffice. AARS winner 'Moondance', a descendant of 'Iceberg' (which does well in Tidewater), is ideal- exquisitely creamy white and fragrant.

You know, if you think you do not have time for roses, there are easy sorts such as hedges, ground covers, shrubs. Just because they are ROSES does not mean they are always high maintenance. 'Knock Out' in all its various guises is so rock solid healthy it is being disdained as too common. But we appreciate those red blooms that joined pinks and reds of holly and camellia in holiday bouquets. Life is complicated enough without bypassing plants because they are plentiful, inexpensive, and easy to grow.

Slower to take off but equally desirable is the antique shrub, 'Ballerina', with masses of pink single blooms on a small rounded shrub. Another antique is thornless 'Zephirine Drouhin', called a climbing rose. Roses don't really climb: you have to tie their waving limbs to the arbor but one experience of that perfume and you will remember the first rose you ever loved.

Rose growers often prefer bareroot roses to those sold in pots. By exercising the option of getting just those naked roots the gardener knows exactly what he is putting into the ground with them. Other gardeners prefer to purchase a rose well started in a pot. Curiously, once they are planting it, they may knock off a lot of the potting soil to use their own amended mixture.

There are as many ways to grow roses as there are rose growers. I greatly admire people who "grow to show" but we limited putterers find it fun to pass along a clutch of imperfect blooms to brighten a day. However, all roses profit from feeding: they are greedy eaters and thirsty drinkers. It is a dream to have a few perfectly grown roses during a summer with plenty of rain and few wicked bugs but we are content to find a niche between dream and reality.