

Everything is Coming Up Roses!

In other places June may be the month that celebrates brides and fathers and roses, but for Virginians, May is the month of roses. May is a capricious month, making up for a slow spring by pushing the rose bushes into full bloom. The sudden heat transformed the climbing Zephirine Drouhin from a mass of buds to a flurry of petals. Usually this old thornless climbing Bourbon rose blooms over a week or ten days in May with casual reblooming if coaxed. This year the intensely fragrant roses exploded overnight and the main event headed for closure.

Nearby is a climbing hybrid tea, 'Aloha', chosen for its perfume as well as its sturdy disposition. The blooms are medium pink with a darker reverse and pale pink edge when the petals open. It is a charmer despite its prickles.

In Tidewater there is no unseasonable weather: all manner of good and wretched weather can be expected at any time. Gardeners just have to cope. We are also blessed with generally poor soil and unreliable rain. Years of compost and manure will eventually turn poor soil into something as rich and crumbly as chocolate cake but meantime you can successfully grow the less fussy shrub roses. Hardy and vigorous shrub roses provide armloads of flowers. Many are large, designed for large borders, but many are small, perfect for smaller gardens.

'Lyda Rose' has small light green foliage and sprays of single roses, white with each petal edge neatly turned to show its pink reverse - delectable! For elegant shrub roses chose one of the English roses bred by David Austin. Most of them are wonderfully fragrant and all are designed to thrive for today's busy gardeners. Plants, even roses, are complex entities and soil is of even greater complexity. If you have lived in several places, even within the same zone, you may have found that a treasure that flourished in one place is destined for the compost pile in the next. Like that footlocker stuffed with curtains that never 'worked' in another room, you have to let beloved plants 'go'. David Austin's 'Graham Thomas' grew wonderfully for me just blocks from my present garden, but not here.

Old roses are those grown before 1867 when the era of Modern roses began with the debut of the first hybrid tea, 'La France'. It was celebrated because it combined the high bud shape of the tea rose with the strength of the Hybrid Perpetual. That was the beginning of truly scientific breeding for particular characteristics and, as you have noticed, there are tens of thousands of roses of all sorts. Many are magnificent: others not worth digging a hole for. I put in a bargain rose ten years ago and I am still wrestling its tough roots and shoots out of the ground.

The best way to choose a rose for your garden is to look at a lot of real roses, not pictures of roses. You will have a splendid opportunity this Saturday, May 15, when Patrick Henry Mall hosts the Virginia Peninsula Rose Society's 62nd Annual Show. The show is from 2 to 8 PM. The theme of this year's show is "From Blizzards to blooms", a nod to one of the most delightful aspects of the show, the Arrangement Division. Roses will be featured in artful arrangements illustrating, "Santa's Tray", 'Snow Covered Trees', 'Icicles' and 'Snowmen'.

This show is your chance to study the roses displayed in the 39 Horticultural Sections. You can see hybrid teas, grandifloras, miniatures, minifloras, florabundas, old garden roses, singles, polyanthas, and shrubs both classic and modern. You will be able to observe the texture of the petals, an important cultural trait for our hot summers. A petal with substance, with starch, (yes, real starch) will have sufficient body not to wilt in our 90-degree days. By visiting with members circulating through the show area, you will discover the names of those plants that do best in gardens here, proving that all news is local!

If one of your own roses wakes up Saturday morning looking lovely, snip it and carry it to the Rose Show from 5:30 AM (yes, really) until 9:15 and members of the Peninsula Rose Society will be there to welcome you and help you enter the appropriate section for judging. No fee, but a warning: rose fever is contagious, so be prepared to become involved.