

## February –In the Pink!

Valentine's Day = roses = chocolate but the no cal choice is a rose! With pictures of roses so ravishing, you do wonder if it is photography that has made such strides or if the roses themselves that have improved as well? It is possibly both. One thing that is a certainty: the research goes on to develop the perfect plant, one that blends beauty, fragrance, and disease resistance.

So much is expected of this flower. It bears the burden of centuries of devotion. Each decade brings scores of new cultivars, each promising to be better than roses of other years. A revolt against this progressive 'improvement' developed when it became evident that some of these buxom beauties had not only lost their fragrance, but many of them suffered from weak necks and scrawny legs.

The revolution led to a recovery of fragrance and a handsome shrub form by combining the genes of modern roses that produced repeated flowering with those of the beloved Old Roses. David Austin has created a kingdom of these English roses, most with names evoking English history.

New in some catalogs this year is a small, 4' x 3' creamy apricot 'Lichfield Angel' and often seen is a great yellow, not too large 'Charles Darwin'. If you are ordering from a catalog or from an internet list be sure to check the size of the full grown plant. Some David Austin roses need a very large garden. Austin roses recommended for Tidewater gardens include 'Sharifa Asma', 'Mary Rose', 'Pat Austin', and 'Wife of Bath'.

Generally speaking, floribunda and polyantha roses require a lot less attention than hybrid teas. Polyanthas 'Marie Daily', 'Perle d'Or', 'Caldwell Pink', and 'The Fairy' are usually successful in heat and humidity. "The Fairy" in particular is indestructible without feeding, extra watering or spraying. 'Perle d'Or' is a yellow pink blend and needs at least six hours of sun to bloom and the others are pink and soldier along with some shade.

Floribundas have a pleasant bushy habit and can be kept compact by cutting the flowers regularly. Lists of floribundas for Tidewater include 'Sunsprite', 'Nearly Wild', and 'Margaret Merril', yellow, pink and white respectively.

All roses are glorious in May but will require more attention as the summer heats up. One thing the rose growers suggest is that to avoid spraying for pests, you grow plants that attract beneficial insects. If all you have are roses, your garden will be a magnet for bugs that find them deluxe dining. Herbs such as thyme, rosemary, or mint attract beetles that eat ground dwelling pests. Tiny flowers and umbel plants attract the tiny wasps that eat aphids, caterpillars, and grubs. Planting a garden with native species creates an environment where your roses will thrive without Herculean efforts.

Years ago I was instructed to prune roses on Valentine's Day – not I suppose because that day is wreathed in roses but because it is easier to remember than mid-

February. You might wait until real spring to prune the more tender varieties to prevent damage from a late freeze.

Aside from the need for at least six hours of full sun, other factors in rose growing

are water and food. They must have an inch of water each and every week and they are heavy, even greedy eaters. Every rose addict has his or her own solution to the feeding problem, most of them expensive.

Follow your instincts and read the directions carefully.

If you find this burdensome, plant 'Knock Out' roses. They flower heroically through hot dry spells, never have black spot or mildew, provide roses for Thanksgiving. The shrubs themselves are handsome with shiny green leaves and red new growth. The flowers are not as elegant as hybrid teas and the fragrance is described as 'slight'. That means it escapes most noses but who can begrudge a bush covered in bright blooms month after month?

**BUYING TIPS:** Buy a healthy rose. Beware of any product that says you can plant it box and all. I saw Knock Out 'Rainbow' in one such container and in pulling it apart discovered there was almost nothing inside! 'Rainbow' has survived but it has not flourished. Avoid any rose that wears an overcoat of paraffin: it may still be dried out.

Soak your bareroot rose before planting. Some rose folk, concerned about disease, dip, not soak, the entire bare root plant in a bucket with a 10% bleach solution to kill any stowaway fungus spore or bacteria.