

AWARD OF MERIT WINNER

A PLAN FOR THE ROSE YEAR

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Clipping, shortening & shaping - that pretty well describes pruning! Maybe if we those terms instead of the word 'pruning', people would not become so intimidated by the prospect of this annual ritual.

I happen to love pruning my roses! It's the one time I feel that I have a little control over them as the rest of the year they sometimes have a mind of their own and do strange things; some Hybrid Teas become Climbers, sending out long canes, while roses that are supposed to be Climbers refuse to do anything but remain a compact bush. It's also the time for 'final exams'. No room for slackers here - either perform or be booted out. There are too many roses, as yet untried, out there in the wings, waiting for a spot in the garden.

For me, it's a time of excitement, visualizing all the improvements that I plan to make and dreaming of perfect roses that will never have a speck of mildew (if only!) and well behaved perennials (one can always hope) that are just beginning to emerge after their Winter's rest.

Keep a garden calendar - it just takes a few seconds to markdown 'what and when'. We all know how time slips away. Making a quick note at the time you apply any kind of fertilizer applied and any kind of a product for pest control, whether it is organic or non-organic is so much more efficient than leaving it to guesswork. I start my calendar in February and have it handy right

inside the garden shed where it is within easy reach. Many times the reason products such as fungicides do not work is because they are not put on at the recommended frequency. If the container says 'every 10 days', it means every 10 days. I hate to admit the number of times I have checked my calendar and in disbelief found it was time to spray again, when I was sure I had just done that 'a few days ago'.

Mulch - it's a good thing - and what more perfect time to load the mulch on, after the rose beds are cleaned up of all old leaves and debris. What you decide to use is not so important; use what is available and cheap. I avoid coarse bark or coarse material because it takes forever to break down and become incorporated into the soil. Coarse bark also provides a place for unwelcome insects to take up residence. (Yes, it looks pretty for awhile, but is not very functional.)

No need to hurry dinner - adding fertilizer can wait until it looks like winter is over. Unless you live where a late frost is not expected, new growth may be doomed to be frost-bitten. There should be enough nutrients already in the soil from last season to keep your roses from starving until mild weather can be counted on.

Some of the slow-release fertilizers are dependent on the soil temperature to become effective. The caveat here is - our weather can

switch radically from warm to cold, which could result in a spurt of new growth that ends up being snowed on and frozen.

What a menu! - it's as complicated or as simple as you want to make it when it comes to choosing fertilizer. The trend is toward 'environmentally friendly' products, and there are a lot out there. For the most part, organic types work slowly over along period of time, but end up improving soil texture, permeability, and general health of the garden as well as providing a food source. Organic can be defined as 'previously living matter' - Nature's slow release fertilizer. I remember years ago the time I grew prize winning dahlias by throwing the dishwater out around them. It was actually more a matter of convenience for me, they being right outside the kitchen door. And it reminded me of an elderly lady that I knew who always watered her wonderfully fragrant roses with the dishwater. I can still recall the fragrance in my memory, I think that was when I fell in love with roses. (Yes, that was before we had dishwashers.)

We are more sophisticated nowadays but the principle is the same. We need to put as much back into the soil as we take out. It costs nothing to compost and gets to be so automatic that it becomes impossible to discard so much as a tea bag anywhere but in the compost bin.

Chemically dependent - I'm not. But I do tend to be more of a moderate when it comes to whether to use 'chemical' (man-made) fertilizer or not. Every spring I apply a slow release type to all my roses and some of the perennials. At least

then I can be assured they will have something on their plate when hunger strikes, even if I become neglectful as the season goes on. This gets supplemented with a variety of other organically derived products like Fish Emulsion & alfalfa pellets and kelp.

Then there is always the 'fast food' liquid type that is put on as foliar food. Some purists blanche at the mention of 'Miracle Gro', but I tend to think that this is an over-reaction. I use it quite a lot, especially if I plan to exhibit roses. Rose people who win the trophies at Shows, will confess if questioned, that they feed their roses two or three times oftener than the average gardener. (There, I've said it!)

It is a proven fact - water is the most important element when it comes to growing good, outstanding roses. How much or how often must be assessed on an individual basis, according to soil conditions, weather and drainage. Never let roots become dried out. Roses have two kinds of roots; anchor roots that secure the rose and feeder roots that lie close to the surface. These little mesh-like feeder roots can dry out quickly. That is one of the reasons that mulch is so important.

It's especially critical when using any chemically based fertilizers to make sure the plants are well hydrated - otherwise they can burn and even die. A good rule is "water first and water after".

The world of roses is so large and exciting, so much a part of our history! Aren't we lucky to be a part of it!