

The Importance of the Proper Planting of Your Roses

Howard E. Jones, Consulting Rosarian
Tidewater Rose Society

Arguably, the single most important step in good rose culture is proper planting. If a poor job is done of planting, nothing else you do at a later date will make up for it. So don't just stick that valuable bush that you may have gone to such lengths to obtain into a small hole in the ground, or you will probably be digging it back up in a year or two. Think of the time and money you will have lost.

So what are the major components in the "proper" planting of a rose bush? I would suggest that they are location, bed preparation and soil amendments, planting hole preparation and the actual planting. Each of these will be discussed in some detail in the remainder of this article.

Location

Recognizing that you may not have the "perfect" site for roses in your yard, you still will need to select the best possible location within the confines of your own yard.

Roses need a minimum of five to six hours of direct sunlight, and close to total sun would be even better for most cultivars. When you consider sunlight, be aware that both your trees and your neighbors' trees will continue to grow in both width and height. This is hopefully a long-term project. How much direct sun will you have in five or ten years? Also, consider that the sun's path in relationship to your rose beds will be different at different times of the year.

You also need a site where there is good natural drainage, or you will have to artificially provide that condition with gravel or drain tiles. Don't pick a low area in your yard because the drainage will be poorest there. Raised beds will help, and that may be the way to go if you don't have satisfactory drainage.

In addition, it is extremely desirable to have protection from the cold, north winter winds. Your house or other structures, a fence, or a tall hedge may provide this shelter.

Bed Preparation

After you select the site for your rose bed (or beds), decide what size bed(s) you want, depending upon the number of bushes you intend to plant. For Hybrid Tea roses, I would suggest that they be planted at least 30 to 36 inches apart, and Floribundas 24 to 30 inches, depending upon the vigor of the variety. Most Miniatures do well if placed 15 to 20 inches apart.

A bed 60 inches (5 feet) wide is ideal for a double row of Hybrid Tea bushes. You can make the bed any length; and if you stagger the bushes, they will be 30 to 36 inches apart on the diagonal also. If there will be more than one bed, leave an aisle or walkway at least 40 inches wide on each side of the bed so that you will have free access for pruning, spraying, fertilizing, etc., without stepping into the beds. This will also make it more enjoyable for visitors to your garden.

It is best, when possible, to prepare the bed in the Fall before planting your bushes in the Spring. Stake off the bed area; and if it is part of your lawn area, spray with *Round-Up* to kill the roots of all grass vegetation. If the roots are not killed, you will have a problem with grass in the beds later on.

Remove the dead sod and hand spade or rotary till the soil 8 to 10 inches deep. If you have very poor soil that is mostly clay, remove it and bring in good quality topsoil. Add large quantities of organic matter (peat moss, compost, well rotted manure, etc.) and 6 to 8 cubic feet of horticultural Perlite per 100 square feet. The Perlite is very important because it is a permanent soil conditioner and will not break down as the organic matter will. It will keep the soil open and porous so that it will hold water and air and still drain well.

Rotary till this mixture until it is homogenous and then water good and allow to settle. Next, take a soil sample and have the pH tested. Roses like a pH of 6.5 to 6.8, slightly acidic, and perform best in this range because they can take up the maximum amount of nutrients. If the tests show that you need to bring the pH up, add limestone; and if you need to bring the pH down, add the proper amount of agricultural sulfur. Most soils in the East are acidic and in the range of 5 to 5.5, and need to have limestone added. After adding limestone or sulfur to correct the pH, till it into the top 8 to 10 inches of the bed.

Raised beds of at least 6 to 10 inches will really help with your drainage. If you decide to go this way, you will need to add sufficient bulk materials to build the bed to the desired height, keeping in mind that the bed will settle. You will also need a border of some kind--salt-treated lumber, etc.--to hold the soil in the raised bed and make it more attractive.

Hole Preparation

I plant each bush in its own individual hole, since the entire bed was not worked 18 to 20 inches deep. This assures a deep root zone and good drainage. Most of the feeder roots are in the top 8 or 10 inches. Normally, I wait until Spring and prepare each hole at the time of planting.

Each hole is made 20 to 22 inches wide and 18 to 20 inches deep. This is a two-wheelbarrow operation. Remove the top 8 to 10 inches and place in a wheelbarrow. In a separate wheelbarrow, remove the next 10 inches, which will be mostly clay, and discard it or save it to be reconditioned and used in other areas of your yard.

Now, to the wheelbarrow that contains the top 8 to 10 inches, add enough peat moss and Perlite so that your mixture will be 1/3 soil, 1/3 peat moss, and 1/3 Perlite. Since my natural soil has a pH of around 5.0-5.5, I add two cups of pelletized limestone, and because phosphorus does not readily move down in the soil, I add one cup of bone meal. Then all of the components are thoroughly mixed until they are a homogenous mixture.

Planting

Now you are ready to plant or transplant your rose bush. Depending on whether you are planting a bare root or potted rose bush, backfill the hole with your prepared mixture until

the crown or bud union of the rose bush will be set at the proper height in relationship to the soil level in the bed.

In our climate zone of 8 here on the coast of Virginia, I like to set the bush so that the bud union will initially be approximately one inch above the soil level. It will generally settle to ground level or slightly above.

When your soil level in the hole is about 6 inches below the bed level, fill the hole with water (about 2 gallons) and allow to drain. Add one cup of bone meal or 1/3 cup of triple super-phosphate in the hole around the bush, and then complete filling the hole until it is at bed level. Water again thoroughly.

Next, cover the bud union with 2 to 3 shovelfuls of the amended soil to keep the bud union and canes from drying out until the bush breaks dormancy. As new growth begins to develop in 2 to 3 weeks, gradually pull the mound of soil away from the bud union, being careful not to damage the new growth. Generally, the soil that has been pulled back will be needed to level the bed where the soil in the hole has settled.

Conclusion

Having said all of the above about the importance of planting your roses properly, I am not saying that just because your rose bush has been planted properly that it will thrive on neglect from that point on. This is just the first important step in growing good roses. You still must give it the benefit of the many other cultural practices that will keep it healthy and productive. But without the right start, your rose bush will begin life with two strikes against it.

It now takes me 1½ hours to plant each rose bush. I hope this is because I am doing a good job and not just getting slower in my old age. Happy planting and successful rose growing. Remember that a rose bush that is “properly” planted has an excellent chance of being in your rose garden for a long, long time.