

Roses in the Florida Landscape

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Success with roses in the Florida landscape is not as difficult as it sounds. Believe it or not, you can grow beautiful roses with minimal effort. The key to success is the variety of roses you select. Old-garden roses and Knock-out® roses haven't proven to take the harsh Florida weather and thrive in almost every landscape. These roses are low maintenance and will retain most of their foliage and bloom throughout the year.

In Florida, most of us think roses are high-maintenance plants, with success only obtained when the plants are cared for properly. Many believe they require heavy grooming, routine fertilizer and weekly applications of fungicide to control the leaf disease. This is all true – for hybrid roses. However, it is not true for old-garden and Knock-out® roses and other cultivars of roses that are grafted on the 'Fortuniana' rootstock. Research has shown that roses grafted on 'Fortuniana' rootstock are more vigorous growers, produce more flowers, and live much longer in Florida than roses grafted on other rootstocks.

There are many varieties of roses on the 'Fortuniana' rootstock to choose from. It all depends on your preference for flower color, fragrance, and shape. Roses prefer to be planted in direct sunlight for a minimum of six hours per day. They also like moist, but well-drained soils. Their roots do not like to be emerged in soggy soils. Most soils in central Florida are sandy. Sandy soils do not hold much moisture, therefore, they should be amended with organic material.

Adding organic material such as compost, manure, or peat will increase the water and nutrient holding abilities of the soil. Soil amendments should be added to the entire planting bed not just to the planting hole. This is because the roots of the rose bush will grow quickly beyond the initial planting hole and will benefit from amendments. To amend the soil, add 2-4 inches of organic material and mix evenly to a depth of 12 inches.

Properly plant the rose bush by digging a hole as deep as the root ball or slightly shallower. Before placing the plant in the hole, loosen its circling roots. Be careful not to plant the rose too deep. Planting it too deep can cause harm to the plant. Fill the hole with soil and apply a 3 inch layer of mulch (wood chips, bark, or pine needles) around each plant. Make sure to keep the mulch an inch or so away from the base of the stem. Irrigate frequently for 6-8 weeks to establish.

If you have established roses in your landscape, February is the time to prune them. Heavy pruning should take place in early spring. This includes shortening the main stems. Leave at least half the length of each main cane that is one to three years old. Also, remove branches that are dead, diseased, damaged, or spindly. This improves the overall form of the rose, controls the height and improves air circulation and light penetration within the plant.

For proper health, the roses should also be fertilized routinely. Select a fertilizer formulated for roses, preferably one containing micronutrients and slow-release or controlled-release nitrogen. Roses should be fertilized once a month from mid-February to mid-November in central Florida. Apply one cup of fertilizer per plant per application or ½ cup bi-monthly. Reduce this amount and frequency for smaller plants.

Roses should be watered on a regular basis, too. Although many of the old-garden roses are drought tolerant, they will benefit from an occasional irrigation during dry periods. Keep leaves dry from irrigation to reduce leaf disease. Micro-irrigation systems such as drip tubing or micro-sprayers are ideal. If overhead sprinkling must be used, water early in the morning so the leaves dry quickly with the sun.

There are a few diseases and insects that can attack roses in central Florida. Keep an eye out for problems. Catching and controlling disease and insects early is much easier than dealing with a large infestation. Most problems can be controlled with fungicides and insecticides found in your local garden store.

For more information on roses and answers to other gardening and landscape questions, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take your calls Monday thru Friday from 9am to 3pm. You may also stop by the free Plant Clinic, located in Osceola Heritage Park, at the Extension Services building during these hours.