

Gardening with Roses

It's hard to feel inspired about roses in the dead of winter, but June is the best month to go shopping (and get planting) if you want to grow the world's most romantic blooms in your own garden.

The dilemma most of us have with roses is that the most desirable of blooms are borne on the most undesirable of garden plants. It's something gardeners and designers have been grappling with for centuries. The rose gardeners of the 17th and 18th centuries might have had more space to play with, but those same gardeners would have given their eye teeth for the repeat flowering, high health, free flowering rose varieties we have at our disposal today.

Traditionally roses were grown in a spot not seen from the house, so that their beauty could be enjoyed in spring, but their bareness hidden away for the rest of the year. These days, most of us don't have that luxury, but we can take a few pointers from those early rose gardens.

The classic 'Rose Garden'

There are certain advantages in creating a dedicated area just for roses, the first being a spectacular display and lots to pick at flowering time. Also on the upside, beds planted only in roses with a clean layer of mulch at their feet are much easier to maintain. Roses need regular deadheading, feeding, weeding and spraying if they are to perform at their healthy best. Gardeners averse to spraying need to be vigilant about clearing away diseased leaf litter – easier when it falls onto mulch, rather than a plethora of companion plants.

To make a formal rose garden easier on the eye in winter, many gardeners go for a geometric layout with low hedges encasing colour coordinated beds of roses. English box is the all time favourite border hedge, but there are many fine alternatives, for example *Corokia*, *Euonymus japonica* 'Microphylla', *Hebe*, *Teucrium*, and compact *Camellia microphylla*, covered in pretty white flowers in autumn.

Paved pathways make access easy in all weathers, but there is no need to go to that expense. A simple 1.5 to 2m wide strip of mown lawn separating two rectangular rose beds of about the same width looks lovely. Add a garden seat at the end as focal point. If you have the space for segregation, consider a 'secret rose garden' screened from the main view. In this case, open trellis is a better option than solid walls and hedges, as cutting off the air flow can exacerbate disease problems with roses.

An informal rose garden

Because of their usefulness for picking, fragrance and medicine roses were always an important ingredient in the true cottage garden, where they cohabited with all sorts of other very useful domestic plants, such as herbs, fruit and vegetables. More aesthetically concerned, the cottage garden of our time is more likely to blend roses with shrubs and perennials, and sweeping lawns. This is an easier way to deal with roses in a smaller garden. Shrubs and perennials are used both to complement the roses in bloom and disguise their winter bareness. The greater variety of plants minimizes disease by attracting a variety of good bugs to help deal with the pests. However, overcrowding can cancel this advantage and often, competition for nutrients from trees and shrubs can mean the roses may not flower as well as they would in a dedicated rose garden, so watering and feeding is important.

The best roses for a cottage style garden are the hardy old fashioned varieties, especially the disease resistant *rugosa* and *alba* roses. The easy-care, disease resistant modern shrub roses, such as Flower Carpet roses are also excellent in this setting.

Choosing roses for your garden

Your choice of roses will depend on what you want from them and how they will fit into your style of garden. The classic vase roses are the hybrid teas with their long strong stems, such as Elina, Peace, and Ingrid Bergman. These roses are well suited to the formal rose garden layout. The more informal old fashioned and David Austin's English roses are also loved for picking, and their fragrance.

In an informal garden choose shrub style roses which flower prolifically and repeat well. Disease resistance, general vigour and flowering performance should be a criteria whatever your intentions. Not all roses are equal in this regard and it's wise to engage in some pre-purchase research. Consider not only the exquisite single bloom, but the overall appeal of the bush, its form, and its foliage.

In a small courtyard garden, consider the compact free flowering varieties sold as 'patio roses'. Flower Carpet roses offer a long continuous flowering season and will grow well in large pots. Climbing roses, such as favourite red 'Dublin Bay', make the most of vertical space.