

A WORD OR TWO ABOUT GARDENING

Low maintenance landscape roses for Miami-Dade

This is the second of two articles on growing roses in Miami-Dade, the first having discussed some of the challenges facing Miami-Dade rose-growers. On this occasion I will concentrate on the use of roses as low maintenance specimen shrubs in the Miami-Dade landscape. In the present context the term “low maintenance” refers to growing roses with minimal use of pesticides, and a reduced need for water and fertilizer. The low maintenance roses in question are so-called “old fashioned” or “heirloom” roses, specifically Tea and China roses, and to a lesser extent some Noisette and Bourbon varieties. One rosarian somewhat wryly referred to Tea and China roses as growing best in places where it is too hot to go outside and enjoy them. Given this assessment alone, such roses should do well in south Florida!

While modern roses such as hybrid teas have extremely showy flowers, their generally poor form and sparse foliage makes them less than ideal as specimen shrubs. This is not the case with many old roses, which can look attractive year round, even when not in flower. All of the roses described in this article will flower on and off throughout the year, though they are at their best from late fall to spring. During the wettest and hottest months of summer there are fewer flushes of new growth and reduced flowering, but most of the foliage is retained without using fungicides.

The original species China rose, *Rosa chinensis spontanea*, grows wild in western China as a sprawling shrub with deep pink, single flowers. At the end of the 18th Ct. a cultivated form, which had been growing in China for more than a thousand years, was introduced to Europe. This rose is known today as ‘Old Blush’ (‘Parson’s Pink China’ – see below) and was followed later by other introductions from China, the forerunners of what were to be known as tea roses. These latter roses were hybrids between *R. chinensis* and *Rosa gigantea* (a 40’ climber found in the steep river gorges of SW China), now referred to as *Rosa x odorata*. What caught the attention of European rose growers was the fact that all these introduced roses were remontant (repeat bloomers). This distinguished them from the roses that were then cultivated in Europe, such as the Centifolias, Gallicas, Damask and Albas. These latter roses had their origins in species native to Europe and the Middle East, and although many possessed attractive, fragrant blooms, they only flowered once a year (a few such as the Damask Perpetual ‘des Quatre Saisons’ can, if correctly pruned, flower twice).

China and Tea roses proved poorly adapted to the cool, damp climate of northern Europe. Their significance to European rose growers was not so much for landscaping, but as a means of breeding repeat flowering roses. It was in fact an American plantation owner, John Champney from South Carolina, who in 1802 first introduced the China rose’s repeat flowering characteristics into a cultivated western hemisphere rose. This involved crossing ‘Old Blush’ with the musk rose, *Rosa moschata* to produce a climbing rose with clusters of semi-double, musk scented,

pale pink flowers ('Champney's Pink Cluster'). Seedlings raised from this hybrid, by the French rose breeder Philippe Noisette, produced the first of the Noisette roses ('Blush Noisette') which was somewhat more compact, with denser clusters of lighter colored flowers, than its' parent. More importantly, in accordance with basic genetic principles (though unknown at that time), the repeat blooming trait (in roses now ascribed to a recessive gene) then fixed in the Noisette gene pool.

At about the same time the Noisette roses were being introduced, another hybrid China rose appeared on the French, Indian Ocean island of Reunion, though on this occasion as a natural cross between 'Old Blush' and the pink autumn damask rose (*R. damascena* var. *semperflorens*). Seed collected from this cross (known as 'Rose Edouard') was sent to Paris and, as with the Noisettes, produced a second generation of roses, of which a proportion were repeat blooming. This was the beginning of another new class of roses, the Bourbons. All of the above classes of rose were to contribute to developing today's modern repeat blooming roses.

A final group of roses, the so-called Bermuda roses, introduced to the island by early European settlers, performs especially well on Miami-Dade's limestone soil. Although of uncertain parentage, these roses are probably of China stock.

When using any of the landscape roses mentioned in this article, you will need to decide if you want to use plants on their own roots or grafted. As was described in the previous article, it is normally advisable to use only roses grafted onto a *Rosa fortuniana* rootstock in south Florida. Unless otherwise stated, the roses mentioned in this article have been successfully grown on their own roots in the Homestead area for more than 10 years. However if you suspect a problem with parasitic soil nematodes, especially root-knot nematodes, consider using grafted roses. Compared to the oolitic limestone of south Miami-Dade and the Keys, light sandy soils (e.g., parts of NE Miami-Dade) are more likely to favor parasitic soil nematodes, one of the main reasons to use grafted roses. Contact the Miami-Dade Extension Office (305 248-3311) if you wish to have your soil assayed for parasitic soil nematodes.

When installing your rose bush choose an open area, free of competing tree roots, with good air circulation and 6-8 hours of direct sun. Early morning sun is especially important to enable wet foliage and stems to rapidly dry off and lessen the risk of disease. Rather than breaking your back digging into the limestone of south Miami-Dade, you may choose to use raised beds, or build up a berm. However, if you choose to use a raised bed, it needs to be of durable construction and sufficient size. The roses listed below could well be in the landscape for many years, and in our local climate some of the Tea and China roses will easily attain a height and width of 8 – 10'. The more scandent shrub roses, especially Noisettes and some Bourbons, will require some support, either a fence, a sturdy trellis or pergola.

Ideally, the planting hole should be 4-5' across and 12 – 18" deep in the center with gently sloping sides resembling a shallow bowl. Plant the rose in the center of the hole, no more than 1/2" above grade and use an organically enriched soil as back fill. If you are planting in rocky soil first screen out all stones more than 1/4" diameter, then incorporate either well-rotted compost or sphagnum peat moss, plus bone meal and greensand. Alternatively you can blend in one of the commercial soil mixes available for growing roses. If your backfill is mostly rubble, use a soil-based

potting mix to which you can add the above amendments. Water in well then spread organic mulch to a depth of 3-4" (e.g., shredded pine bark or pine bark nuggets). Container roses are definitely preferable to bare-root plants, but if you purchase the latter first soak the roots in water overnight before planting. An application of one of the new 100% slow release complete palm fertilizers (8/4/12+4% Mg) every 3 –4 months provides adequate nutrition (UF/IFAS horticulturalists now recommend these palm fertilizers as suitable for most landscape shrubs in south Florida).

Probably the easiest of the "old" roses to grow locally are the China roses, and of these 'Old Blush' is a perfect introduction to growing this class of rose. Sometimes dismissed as just another pink rose, 'Old Blush' makes a wonderfully full, vigorous, free-flowering shrub, which grows to 4-6', with plenty of deep green, disease-resistant foliage. As they age the silvery pink flowers become more open, develop carmine pink streaks, and are followed by hips that should be removed (to encourage further flowering). This rose is a survivor. My own specimen has survived first inundation after the 15" rainfall of the "No Name" storm of October 2000, then two years later it was partially up-rooted by a careless driver. There is also a far less common and even more free-flowering climbing sport of 'Old Blush', which can grow to more than 20'.

'Cramoisi Superieur' is one of a number of red China roses that were common in southern states. The cupped, double flowers have deep crimson red petals with a silvery reverse, and a small dab of white in the center, and are fade resistant even during our hottest days. 'Cramoisi Superieur' will easily grow to a height and width of 8-10'. However, some words of caution regarding the ultimate size of the roses mentioned in this article: the vast majority of rose books describe old roses grown under a more temperate climate than south Florida. For instance the noted British rosarian Graham Stuart Thomas refers to 'Cramoisi Superieur' as being "petite" in its habit of growth. This description clearly does not apply under south Florida conditions, and illustrates the need to expect enhanced growth. 'Louis Philippe', another red China rose, is somewhat smaller but otherwise almost identical to 'Cramoisi Superieur' and familiar as the cracker rose to southern gardeners.

Two smaller China roses have succeeded on their own roots in south Miami-Dade: 'La Vesuve' (growing to at least 4' with large, loose, silvery pink flowers), and 'Ducher' (to 3', creamy white blooms), which is probably best used as a bedding rose. One final China rose, 'Mutabalis' (The Butterfly Rose), is worthy of mention as a specimen shrub. Easily growing to 8-10' in height and width, it produces bright orange buds that open to reveal single, large, delicate flowers having five pale yellow petals. These deepen to a salmon pink and finally a deeper rosy pink. Flowers in all these different colors are present at the same time, and appear to flutter above the bush like butterflies. Space permits mention of only one of the Bermuda roses, Vincent Godsiff, notable for flowers of an almost neon pink. These verge on being gaudy when compared to the pastel shades typical for most "old" roses. Growing as an upright 6' shrub, it develops the twiggy growth that one would expect from its putative China ancestry.

One of the benefits of growing own root roses is being able to pass on cuttings to friends and neighbors, a common practice in past years. I benefited from this personally when given cuttings from a rose in the yard of long time Homestead resident, Ms Annabell Griffis. This in turn had been grown from a cutting she had received from her mother, and the rose has now survived with minimal care in my own yard for almost twenty years. Although of uncertain designation, it appears very like the spray sport of 'Cecile Brunner'. This is a large, vigorous, spreading, almost scandent shrub that needs plenty of room. Clusters of pale to blush pink, small, pointed flowers appear through out the year, fading almost white on fully opening. Two other scandent to climbing roses, both Noisettes do well locally. 'Crépuscule' can grow to 8 –12' with attractive apple green foliage, and clusters of coppery orange flowers, fading to apricot. This is one of the few "old" roses to occasionally display signs of trace element deficiencies when grown locally. 'Felleberg' will grow to at least 8-10', and is more open, with less foliage but flowers freely with clusters of bright crimson, cupped, double flowers.

Finally, there are several Tea roses to recommend, most notably 'Mrs B. R. Cant', 'Marie Van Houtte' and 'Mons. Tillier'. Teas differ from China roses in being less twiggy, and usually more open with upright growth, and larger, high pointed flowers. Unlike China roses, which withstand pruning well, Tea roses are slow to recover from extensive pruning. For this reason give Tea roses sufficient room, to avoid being forced to cut them back when they outgrow a site that is too small. This is true for both 'Mrs B. R. Cant' and 'Marie Van Houtte', the former easily growing up to 8-10', the latter only slightly smaller. 'Mrs B. R. Cant' produces many long lasting, deep rose pink to red, cabbage-like blooms, with the innermost petals a softer silvery pink. Equally vigorous, 'Marie Van Houtte' produces classic high centered tea flowers that open creamy white to pale yellow, a light pink that initially suffuses the petal margins spreading as the flower ages. Similar flowers are produced on 'Mrs Dudley Cross', a smaller rose with a more restrained growth habit, which lacks prickles (locally referred to as the 'Key West Thornless rose'). 'Mons. Tillier' is tall (to 8') but less spreading (to 5') than the previous Tea roses, and has striking carmine to brick red double flowers.

You or a friend can grow the above roses from 6-8" pencil thick cuttings, best taken right after flowering in the fall. Remove side shoots and all but the top most 2-3 leaves. Cut the bottom of the stem just below a bud or node, and remove 2-3 thin $\frac{3}{4}$ " strips of bark from opposite sides of the stem. Dip this end in a rooting compound before inserting the cutting in a potting mix (contact the UF-IFAS/Miami-Dade County Extension Office, 305 248-3311 for a full publication with complete details).

Finally, low maintenance does not mean no maintenance. Regular deadheading, removal of diseased and dead canes, structural pruning and prompt weeding are essential. A small price indeed to be freed from the spray can, and still derive the pleasure of an amicable, long-term affair with roses in your landscape.