

# ROSE CARE

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By Miki Wade

### Preparing Your Soil for Roses

Spring is the time to begin thinking about the soil in your rose garden—either renovating old soil in an existing garden or preparing for a new garden. What you want is good loamy soil. Quite honestly, most of us don't live in a world with perfect loam. We must create it. The #1 recommendation for making rich, loamy soil is good, organic compost:

Garden soil that is regularly amended and mixed in with compost will have improved soil texture and structure, increased water retention in sandy soils and loosened clay soils, control pH, feed helpful earthworms, control weeds, aerate the soil, retain moisture, provide healthier, more productive and more disease resistant plants, promote better drainage, provide soil nutrients, increase beneficial microorganism activity and provide mulch. Can you ask for anything more?! Compost is indeed black gold for your garden.

Furthermore, compost will warm the soil in the spring, stimulating plants to grow sooner in the season, and cool the soil in the summer allowing plants to perform better in the summer heat. Also, if you keep your garden well composted you will not need to water and fertilize as often. With all these beneficial reasons to add compost, can you think of why not to do it?

Here are some pitfalls to watch for when building a quality rose soil.

- Sometimes you'll hear someone say, "Add sand to loosen up the clay soil". Doesn't clay and sand equal concrete? Over time, this sand will settle to form a "hard pan" below the soil's surface much as if you were to put a concrete pad under the soil. This will trap water and prevent good drainage.
- If you feel the need to add peat moss to the mix, again use caution. The material is very slow to decompose and can drive soil pH way high. Plus it tends to either fly away or it gets hard and takes forever to absorb water.

When you have completed creating your soil blend, check the drainage. To do that, dig a foot-deep hole and fill it with water. If the water drains out in about 15 minutes, the drainage is great. If it takes longer, you need to improve the soil drainage further. If shorter, you may need to add more organic material to help retain it.

\*In tight clay soils, consider "double digging" the bed. This is done by digging out the soil to a depth of 12 in) and placing it off to the side. Then a second 12 in. of soil is dug out and placed to a separate side. The bottom of the dug out area is improved with organic materials. Then the top layer of soil is placed in the bottom of the dug area, and the second layer of soil is placed on the top of that—essentially flipping the first two feet of soil. As each layer is reinstalled, be sure to include compost.

## Planting your Roses

Roses are best planted in the fall or early Spring. Dormant plants are preferred over fully leafed out plants except for container grown and mini roses. Mini roses are usually purchased fully leafed out and best planted when the weather begins to warm in April or May. If you are transplanting an established rose bush, wait until fall or early spring when the plant is dormant, and remember to give it a judicious pruning.

Site and exposure requirements depend on the type of rose. Usually 6 hours of sun is preferred for most roses but there are a few shrubs, climbers and Rugosa types that will grow in more shaded situations. If you must choose between morning or afternoon sunshine, take the earlier option as long as you have 6 hours of sun. Early morning sun will dry off the leaves, helping to prevent mildew and blackspot. Roses will tolerate a windy exposed site provided that hardy varieties are chosen or a winter mulch is applied to protect from harsh winter conditions.

1. Dig an appropriate sized hole for the root ball, loosening surrounding soil; usually a 2ft by 2ft hole for large roses and a 1 foot hole for minis.
2. Add some compost or well rotted manure to the hole plus a handful of bone meal. Mix gently. If planting a bare-root rose, spread the roots over this mixture placing the crown at the soil level or slightly *below* (about an inch or two) the surface of surrounding soil and refill around the roots with more of your good mixture.
3. If planting a potted rose, maintain as much soil around the roots as possible. Water the new bush in its new home thoroughly, pulling extra soil up above planting level to help maintain moisture within the bush as it becomes established.
4. Firm the plant and water well. Water is really the secret in helping a rose or any plant get off to a good start in life. Remember to water a new plant often, especially if the weather turns hot.

## Fertilizers

The first and most important type of rose food is plain old water. A rose that is well watered throughout the summer will grow far better than one that's treated to loads of chemical rose foods but little water.

- Fertilize your roses every four to six weeks depending on the roses you have.
- Make sure you water before to avoid it being burned by fertilizer. Water after you fertilize to help move the nutrients into the root zone.
- Fertilizer should not be applied after August or early September, as the plants need to use up what's in the soil and 'harden up' for winter. Late fertilization

may encourage new growth that can be damaged by frosts.

I use organic fertilizer with great success. Organic fertilizers have great value in the garden; whether you utilize only organics or choose to supplement your regular chemical-based fertilizer program, your roses will prosper. While both chemical-based and organic fertilizers may provide required nutrients, the benefits of organic fertilizers are significant. Organic fertilizers can improve the quality of the soil by contributing organic matter. Several types of organic fertilizers are the following:

Alfalfa Meal, Blood Meal, Bone Meal, Fish Bone Meal, Cottonseed Meal, Fish Meal, Fish Emulsion, Compost, various types of manures. Look for rose food which may include any of the above ingredients.

### **Foliar Feeding**

Roses can and will take up nutrients through their foliage by spraying them with a liquid fertilizer. This is a good way for the roses to perk up immediately. You can make a foliar feed with compost or alfalfa tea.

### **Alfalfa Tea Recipe:**

- Choose a garbage bin or barrel with no leaks and a tight fitting lid. Position it in an out of the way place - you don't want to have to move it once it's full.
- For a full size garbage bin (20 gallons) add 16 cups of alfalfa pellets or alfalfa meal (4 cups to every 5 gallons or 22 litres of water)
- Add 1 - 2 cups of Epsom salts (magnesium sulphate crystals) (or one quarter to half a cup to 5 gallons) Optionally, add two tablespoons of Iron Chelate
- Fill with water, put on a tight lid to prevent mosquitos from breeding in your "swamp"
- Let stand for one week until it bubbles with fermentation. Your nose will tell you that it's ready.

### **Using it:**

Apply alfalfa tea once per month in the spring and summer, especially after the first flush of flowers, to encourage repeat blooming. You can reduce or eliminate the Epsom salts in later batches.

Stop applying it in August, when you want the plants to start hardening off for the winter, and don't want to encourage soft new growth.

- Put on some old clothes - you're going to get splashed, and you don't want to be socializing with anyone while wearing the alfalfa tea!
- Scoop off the liquid with a bucket and apply.
- Pour a gallon of tea per rose around the base of the plant; more for large climbers, less for potted roses and minis.
- Soak small potted roses in a bucket of tea for 15 minutes each.

- When you have scooped off most of the liquid, you will be left with a thick goop of alfalfa in the garbage bin. There are two ways to treat this:
  - Method A: You can add another quarter-cup of epsom salts, fill the garbage can one third of the way up again, and stir the mix briskly so that the alfalfa is suspended in the water. This slurry can be applied to your roses immediately. Choose the roses in the back of your beds for this tea, where the greenish brown puddle of alfalfa slurry won't be too visible.
  - Method B: Add the full dose of Epsom salts, refill to the top with water and let sit for another week. Use the liquid, and then bury the alfalfa dregs into your compost pile (by this time they will be pretty smelly).

**Compost Tea Recipe:** Compost tea is more or less a liquid version of compost. You take your solid compost, and soak it in water and let the mixture sit around for a few hours or a few days. Then you pour the liquid through a screen, or through cheesecloth or something similar to strain out the solid material into a bucket. What you have then is compost tea. Compost tea is great, because it is a very mild, organic liquid fertilizer that provides beneficial live organisms that improve the soil where you use it. It doesn't burn plants like store bought fertilizers can.

Well known and local Rosarian Dennis Konsmo has a recipe that he calls his 5-meal recipe. Mix the following meals and put 5 cups of this mixture around each rose bush.

- Blood Meal.
- Fish Meal
- Alfalfa Meal
- Bone or Fish Bone Meal
- Kelp.