

WHY GROW ORGANIC?

A pesticide free garden with a balanced organic soil profile allows nature to do its thing to take care of pests and disease in the garden. Passionate advocates for organic rose gardening share their tips for creating a thriving organic rose garden where children, pets, and birds can enjoy the garden worry-free.

by Pam Greenewald



ABOVE: An organic rose garden allows children to run barefoot throughout the garden and enjoy the pure sweet fragrance of roses. photo by nidvoray.

To create optimal health for our roses we cannot have it both ways. We cannot use some organic methods and also use chemical fertilizers, herbicides and/ or pesticides. Roses thrive best in a sustainable environment that is made by cultivating and building a virtual army of beneficial microbes who become our allies in balancing our soil life. For millions of years nature has done just fine on her own. No one is fertilizing the forests or spraying them to make sure populations of insects are kept in check. By observing natural environments, we can learn to respect the divine intelligence of nature, and the way it has been set up for us and the creatures with whom we share our beautiful planet.

A diverse soil food web exists within nature. These microorganisms consist of bacteria, fungi, nematodes, protozoa and others that are beneficial to our soil and roses. Most of these organisms are invisible to the naked eye. These microorganisms feed the soil, which in turn feeds the rose. The goal of growing organic is to have this diverse and balanced soil food web established in the garden.

When chemicals are used in the soil, they kill off beneficial fungi and bacteria. Consequently, the garden does not have what it needs to have nature's natural balance. If your garden has commercial pesticides, herbicides, fungicides and salt-based chemical fertilizers in its soil, you will need to completely reestablish the soil food web to create an organic rose garden. This could take a year or longer and can be accomplished by adding compost, mulch, and soil inoculants. I can assure you that the process is totally worth the effort! By no longer using pesticides in our gardens, we can help protect our environment.

First Comes the Pest and then come the Predators

Growing roses organically is really not hard to do. There are so many great organic products on the market including soil amendments as well as organic pesticides. But rarely do these even need to be used if the organic rose garden is in balance and insect allies are allowed to live and multiply, working with us instead of against us.

photo by jamiestentaford



photo by ferarceamare



photo by Grigorita Ko



There is a rhythm to the natural balance of our biosphere which is well-known and most rose gardeners, who grow organic, share the same philosophy. There is a respect for Mother Nature that trusts that there is a life force that insures the best case scenario for all our plants as we allow the 95% good bugs, both seen and unseen, to live and thrive and become our army against the negative forces that would attack our roses.

I asked organic rose growers from around the country for their best tips for growing roses organically. Here are their responses:

From Julie Matlin, Master Consulting Rosarian, who is completely organic and writes a monthly column for a local nursery on rose care. She is the restorer and curator for the Bidwell Mansion Historic Rose Garden.

For me, it's only about sustainability, thinking green, and about soil health. It is my mantra and what I teach my preschoolers; healthy soil equals healthy plants equals healthy people and a healthy earth. To love your soil is to love your garden, and all creatures that call it home; that is to love your Earth.

As to the question of blackspot, by understanding the where, when, and why/life cycle, I never worry about it. My garden is so integrated with so many different kinds of plants that my OGR's and other roses rarely get it. But, if for any reason I do, I pick off the leaves, properly dispose of them, and wait for warmer, stable weather. I am so integrated with Perennials, Biennials, Annuals, and small Shrubs that my garden is very balanced; there's something for everyone.

As an OGR collector and curator for a historic rose collection, I do not use chemical pesticides because I am good at rose cultural care. However, the idea of breeding disease-resistance in roses, is essential in getting the general public to grow and buy roses. For me, "Earth-Kind" is a fabulous program. I am also a huge proponent of spraying with Compost Tea.

From Sherri Berglund, who owned B&B Roses that specialized in old and found roses from California.

Every garden is unique and has its rewards and challenges. No garden is the same year after year, for there are many factors involved that change the daily dynamics. The key to rose gardening without chemicals is to be observant of the daily changes affecting our roses. Paying attention to the weather, the soil, and the needs of our individual roses insures a preventative approach. Keeping our roses well-fed during the growing season with organic fertilizers, which means every 2-3 weeks, will keep their immunity up and they will be better equipped to fight off fungal diseases and insect

TOP: Chickens have a voracious appetite for Japanese beetles. MIDDLE: Ladybugs eat thrips. LEFT: Even your cat enjoys roses! NEXT PAGE: A frog enjoys the roses.



photo by Pam Greenewald.

attacks. It is the same with our bodies, when we are well-nourished we are able to withstand illness.

If at all possible, I use organic growing methods, using composted animal manures and clean (weed free) straw as mulch, which is replenished once or twice a year. My soil is a gravelly loam that requires plenty of organic matter both when planting and as a mulch. Fertilizer consists of feeding new or young plantings, along with potted plants, with feather meal and bat guano combined with chicken compost. The local feed store/garden supply store sells a rich combination of natural fertilizers they market as “Julie’s Rose Food” which was a brain storm of Julie Matlin, an ARS Master Consulting Rosarian and good friend.

I stay away from high N-P-K fertilizers for established plants. The resulting lush new growth seems to be fodder for every insect around so why spend money on the fast acting, high N-P-K fertilizers and then have to use insecticides. We don’t have those nasty Japanese Beetles here (yet) and black spot only occasionally shows up on predictably the same rose varieties in late spring. Spray is impossible for me to consider with the 600 +/- roses growing here, since I am the proverbial chief-cook-and-bottle-washer when it comes to garden maintenance.

Now that the garden is established, I rarely see insects creating problems. I entice birds and predatory insects into the garden. Black sunflower seed, thistle seed, suet, meal worms and plenty of fresh water for the birds and lots of

companion plants to attract the predatory insects. Sweet Alyssum along with any plant in the composite family are grown throughout the garden. Love those daisy flowers!

I take a very holistic view when planning a garden; all things are connected, so if I poison the insects bothering my roses, the birds and “good” bugs are likely to be harmed as well. Better to be tolerant and expect some damage as part of gardening. Choosing organic gardening methods means I can enjoy barefoot grandchildren and healthy produce from the vegetable garden. It means I don’t have to don mask, gloves and spray suits to attack insects and diseased roses in the garden. If a rose continues to show problems, I find another home for it – life is too short to obsess over a perfect flower. I say, plant lots of diverse flowers and keep the best. Toss the rest!

John Starnes Jr. lives in Tampa, Florida and has been cultivating roses organically since 1983.

My recipe: plain clay cat litter for Tampa’s sandy soil, rotted oak mulch, a cup of Mill’s Magic Rose Mix quarterly, a handful of Southern Ag trace elements, Alaska Fish Fertilizer, dolomite and Epsom salt annually. I don’t get black spot due to the many species of beneficial bacteria and fungi I added to the gardens years ago. Also added were two species of Trichogramma wasps for aphids. Birds eat many pests and I add NoloBait for lubber grasshoppers in the spring. I believe organic rose growing is MUCH cheaper, great for the environment and it WORKS. For the 19 years I was an organic landscaper, my customers were very happy.



photo by Kseniia

Lynessa O'Grady from Spring, Texas shared her perspective. For 14 years I lived in Northwest Houston and had many rose bushes. I had a good compost pile that I used when planting. Before I got that started, I bought composted cow manure and mixed it with good garden soil. Most of my roses did well without additional fertilizer. Later I got Liz Druitt's book, *The Organic Rose Garden*, and now I plant garlic among my rose bushes and other plants. I have one pest which takes perfect half moon chunks out of rose leaves, the leaf cutter bee. They are very gentle creatures, and wonderful pollinators. So, I have to live with the damage. When black spot strikes I get rid of diseased foliage. I try to pull or dig up any weeds. I have two small dogs who go out back and I would never use poisons to kill weeds. Sometimes wildflowers spring up from seed, which I love.

Organic Soil and Amendments

Soil is composed of three main particles - sand, clay, and silt. The ideal soil is loam, which contains equal parts sand, clay, and silt. Loamy soil has the ability to retain moisture while allowing adequate drainage. Soils are highly influenced by climate. Arid climates produce sandy soils while warm, rainy climates produce rain forests with dense, acidic soil. Climates that do not offer ideal soil will need to be amended to create an organic soil rich in nutrients.

The scientific definition of organic soil is "Of, relating to, or derived from living matter." Organic soils contain organic matter that is rich in many nutrients and minerals. Organic fertilizers work with the environment, provide adequate nutrients, and give back to the soil what the plant has taken.

Mulch, compost and manure can be used to amend nutrient deficient soil, like sandy soil, and turn it into a rich, organic soil packed with nutrients. Organic materials also facilitate drainage while retaining moisture. Soil amendments are vital when preparing soil for planting. Soils must be amended often or else the soil will become void of nutrients and organic matter.

Finally, I finish with this unusual, but not so far-fetched, statement from the book *Mayan Messages* by Theresa Crabtree:

"When you attend to a plant, it soaks up the energies you put into it. When you lovingly tend a plant, singing and talking to it and providing it with the nourishment it needs, it will reward you with benefits beyond belief. A plant can read your energy signature and provide you with specific minerals and energy that you are lacking."

So our roses are definitely taking care of us as we take care of them.



photo by Dreamframer

ABOVE: Dogs enjoy romping in the garden and owners don't have to worry about the dogs getting sick from chemicals used in the garden. LEFT: The bee is one of the most invaluable living things on the planet. Organic gardens can help counter the decline in pollinator populations.