Responsible, Organic, Simple & Earth-Friendly

Ruf's Organic Roses

by Pamela Greenewald
P.O. Box 1106
Alachua, Florida 32616
gardenangel22@gmail.com

"When we kill off the natural enemies of a pest we inherit their work" C.B. Huffaker

In June of 2011, I had a working vacation to three rose nurseries in Europe: David Austin, Peter Beales and the Rosenschule Ruf Nursery of Werner and Sabine Ruf located in Steinfurth, Germany near Frankfurt. It is a very small town inundated with rose nurseries — famed to be the home of no less than 200 rose nurseries in the early 1900s. Thus began the first leg of my "Working Vacation" as I had arranged ahead of time to help out with the daily chores of the business. I met Ruf at the ARS convention in Palm Springs in 2009 where I found his enthusiastic personality contagious and delightful. I felt I had met a kindred spirit in the rare world of growing roses without chemicals. Ruf grew up in the nursery business as his father had before him. I recently interviewed Werner for this article.

Geese wondering the Schaugarten (looking garden)

How long have you and your wife, Sabine, had your rose farm and nursery center? The nursery was started in 1930 by my grandfather, my father came later in the 50s from Bavaria to our town as a farmworker. Sabine handles all of the shop business, the decorations and the arrangement of our gardens. Our children, Nannetta and Manuel, now 24 and 22 years old, are helping in the working seasons. My father, at 82, is still working in the rose fields sometimes.

Tell us about the 200 rose growers of the past? How did that happen? In 1863 the Brothers Schultheis started the first German rose nursery here. He needed a lot of workers. He hired the local farmers as workers so all the farmers learned how to grow roses and continued in their own farms. Even though there are only about 25 nurseries left from 200 farms in 1970, Steinfurth is still an important center of rose growing in Germany.

What caused you to grow the roses organically? What is your philosophy?

The main reason was the health of our children and ourselves, all other things came later. If customers ask me what benefit they will have from buying organically

grown roses, I tell them three things:

1. The biggest advantage is ours, we do not get contaminated by using chemicals;

2. The second advantage goes to the environment, it is preserved and stays natural;

3. The third benefit is for the customers, they get uncontaminated and tough plants.

What are your favorite remedies against the following?

Weeds: Hoeing, hoeing, hoeing. Okay, there are some tricks, too. Using machines exactly in time, and after we finish budding we sow phacelia into the roses. It grows in Aug. and Sept., covers the field and dies by frost in Nov., leaving a clean field.

Pests? Cultivate tough and resistant varieties, use insects like robbery mites against spider mites in the glasshouse and keep useful birds around.

Disease (Fungus)? Growing resistant varieties is the most important and use helpful organic plant protection products. See my tips on how to grow roses organically.

Fertilizers? Of course only organic, we add them only to the soil where the rain worms can digest them. Our favorites: horse manure with ground rock or our special "rufs rose fertilizer" which is produced by Engelhard Company by using fermentation with pressed grass. This fertilizer is phosphorus-reduced, because most gardeners have enough phosphorus by using their own compost or even woodash.

How many rose varieties do you grow? About 550

Tell us about your breeding program? Rugosas — 'Wild Fox', 'Wild Eagle', etc., no program! The thing was that my father really likes jam made from the rosehips. The craziness happened when he saw all the seeds, and we got 1,200 seedlings, and from these I started to select. Even the most sold variety 'Wild Eagle' was already sorted out and planted at the horse-paddock with others, where I recognized that is was even darker and even more continuously flowering.

What do you use your geese for? Mowing the grass in between the rose pots.

What do you do with the Icelandic Ponies? Feed them! Sometimes, twice a year, they pull my Hrannar, a cultivator, through the rows.

You bud roses in the growing fields. Why do you do this instead of growing them own-root? It is the traditional technique, and it allows us to grow nearly all varieties. Even the plants are tougher in our climate, because the rootstock we use (*Rosa Dunmetorum laxa*) is well adapted to our climate. We tell all the customers to plant the budding point 2-inches beneath the surface of the earth. The roses are able to sucker (like gallicas or pimpinellifolias) and some of them even reject the rootstock after that. The ones that do not grow well own-root (like the hybrid teas) can keep on growing on the rootstock.

Werner Ruf

all photos courtesy Pam Greenewald

Tell me all about the food products made from your roses? Which varieties do you use? Only very fragrant varieties, our favorites are the damasks and albas, but the rugosas too. The english roses or hybrid teas which are fragrant enough are not tough enough to last a longer growing period without struggling with diseases or frost. Sabine makes her salve, rose jam, rose vinegar, rose sugar, rose salt, rose pepper and a rose tea from the dried petals. Most of the petals are crushed, frozen and sold to an organic diary, which produces rose yogurt. The harvest is actually about 700 kgs a year.

Ruf's Tips on Growing Roses Organically

Choice of varieties and pruning growing roses organically requires a feeling for roses. Find out what conditions your garden, your soil and your climate have, and then find the varieties of roses that fit your conditions best. These may be rugosas in a cool coastal climate and pernisianas in a desert climate. Only a few roses grow well in both climates. Try to choose the best place for the roses in your garden. Prune your roses well and cut off all old and bad canes, this is the best prevention for fungus diseases.

Nutrition

The most important thing to be successful in growing roses organically is the organic nutrition. Organic farmers don´t fertilize their plants, they feed their soil life. All nutrients are developed by the microorganisms in the soil. We are part of the Bioland Association, which principles are often shown in the following cycle:

Healthy soil > Healthy plants >
Healthy animals > Healthy humans.

Most people believe that besides sun and water,

plants need salt like nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and some trace-elements. Nutrition with salt works quickly and easily, but it causes fast growth and the plants become susceptible to disease. The truth is that nutrition with salt is completely unnatural. In nature, only the rotting of natural substances brings fertilization. And in untouched soil, nutrient salts are always less. In a complex system millions of microorganisms live together, and their lives depend on one another. The plants are involved this cycle exchanging elements with these microorganisms. Nutrient salts exist for only a few moments. Mostly they are fixed in the humic substances which prevent them from washing out. It is unnatural to breakdown all substances to salt and then build them completely new. Beginning with animals eating plants every individual tries to use complete modules to build up new substances. Even parts of the cells are integrated back in new cells. The bacteria in a healthy soil are in great parts similar to the bacteria in the intestines of humans. Some important trace elements, like cobalt from rock flour, are building important enzymes like vitamin B12, which plays a big role in fixing nitrogen from the air. So farm yard manure or compost and rock flour is the base of real nutrition. Horse manure is a perfect rose fertilizer, because of its high content of potassium and its dry, warm character which makes the soil fluffy.

Rose petals in boxes.

A well-conditioned soil life is even able to repress diseases. Different bacteria live in different soil layers. Do not destroy them by digging too deeply into the soil. Turn the soil flat layers, but not deeply, so you can bring air and rock flour deeper into your soil without disturbing the micro organisms. We use technical equipment wherever possible, but always in context of the weather and what the plant needs. We fertilize the soil in the year before we plant the rootstocks. The complete field gets horse manure and is seeded with a green manure-mix which we cut down and work into the soil.

For cultivation in pots, we use a special potting soil with 30 percent clay and natural fertilizer. The pots are made out of old paper, and they are completely biodegradable. While these pots look quite organic, the important thing is that they do not cause any waste. What's great for the customers is that they don't have to be afraid of damaging any roots by removing the pot, they can plant it in the ground with the pot!

Another good practice in organic growing techniques is mulching. If you cover the leaves that are infected with old fungus and are laying on the ground with clean mulch, the fungus on the leaves will be killed by the soil life. It is helpful to give a little bit of hoof and horn meal on the leafs under the mulch, especially if you use bark.

Spraying

Using substances to prevent fungus diseases or infections with insects is possible, but only with natural substances like sodium hydrogenous carbonate and oil against powdery mildew or potassium soap against greenfly. Years after we went organic with the nursery, I was thinking about the problems we had in former times when we were still using pesticides. We usually used chemicals in May, and the greenfly problem seemed to be solved, but then it came back even harder in Aug. What happened? The chemicals killed 99 percent of the greenflys, but 100 percent of the ladybirds and other insects that eat greenflys. So the one percent greenflys that survived was resistant to the chemicals and the problem was bigger than before. Today we regulate the greenfly by using potassium soap, and that kills only 80 percent of them, but it saves the natural predators, and therefore keeps the natural balance.

In very hard cases of insect invasions it is allowed to spray natural pyrethrum. Spraying is helping momentarily but not solving the problem itself! The most important thing is to find out why roses get diseases. All diseases are showing us that something is going wrong. Most people look at the disease as the problem but it is only the symptom. So the challenge is to find the real reason for the disease. In a natural healthy environment your plants will be able to solve the problems by themselves. Be sure to have the mentioned substances at home for emergencies, but it is more important to help your plants to get resistant against the diseases. If you want to do something preventive, spray horsetail- extracts, seaweed or stone powders on them. Be sure to give natural predators a home in your garden with insect-hotels and pollen-spending flowers and they will solve your insect-problems for you.