



Rose Testing in Fairbanks

by
Mike Salzman

Editor's note: this is the first of a two part article written by Fairbanksan, Mike Salzman who has been experimenting with roses for the past nine years at his home in Shannon Park Subdivision off Trainer Gate Road.

If you want to experiment with something other than the popular hybrid tea and floribunda roses, then you have to order roses from nurseries in the Lower 48. Most local nurseries do not carry many of the hardy roses worth testing. Mail order roses usually do not bloom the first summer because they are so small. If the rose winters over, it will usually be the third summer before it blooms in my yard. I guess some things are worth the wait. When I first started my testing, I had so much room to fill in my yard, that I just blindly ordered roses expecting many to die the first winter. There were always one or two that surprised me, and now I have a decent supply of roses, about 90 plants at last count.

In the beginning, I wondered if I should order more than one bush of each variety as I had no way of knowing if I was getting a poor quality bush. Also, multiple bushes would give a truer indication of winter hardiness. If a rose bush didn't make it through it's first winter, the rose might not be hardy or maybe it died because we had a particularly hard winter. I made the decision to try as many types of roses as possible, so I just ordered one of each bush. I also tested a variety only for one year unless the bush showed some particular promise or if it had been a hard winter, or if I did something stupid like back over the bush with my lawn mower.

I made an early decision to select roses grown on their own roots. Several times, I had a grafted rose die back below the graft only to have the rootstock survive. I didn't want the rootstock pushing up new canes and taking up prime space in my yard. Another reason for avoiding grafted roses was the controversy about how deep to plant the bush. I have seen a couple of articles that said to place the bud union deep below ground to give it some additional protection in the winter. But if you put the bud union below ground, the rootstock could sucker and it could be hard to distinguish between canes from the rootstock and canes from the grafted rose. Besides, when the frost goes four feet or deeper, it doesn't make much difference if the bud union is above ground or below.

After the first couple of years of rose growing, I began to realize that the short summer made it a little foolhardy to try the repeat bloomers. If a rose takes 45-50 days to cycle through to a second bloom period, then the bush was pushing its luck trying to get the second bloom cycle out by the end of the season. All my roses seem to be a little slow to start growing in the spring. Then, they take off with the warmth and long daylight of June and July, but the cool, rainy weather of August really seems to slow 'em down. And then it's frost time in September. With so many buds being lost to frost, I began to wonder how hard it might be for the rose bush to be putting so much energy into trying to reproduce when it really should be concentrating on going dormant for the winter and setting buds for next summer. With those thoughts in mind, I began to concentrate more on once blooming roses, the hardier rugosas and the species roses. Unfortunately, the few English/Austin roses that I have tried haven't shown the hardiness that I need.

Another choice I made was not to concentrate on rose ratings, whether for show or garden. My roses had to be winter hardy! While I do enjoy the look of a hybrid tea and a floribunda, I didn't want to be replanting them every year. And doesn't a rose bush put out more blooms from the older canes than it does from new canes? One thing that has pleased me is that the once bloomers tend to be more fragrant. I don't cut my roses for inside, but my neighbors sure enjoy seeing the bushes in bloom. When I clip a bud for them, they enjoy the fragrance too!

This is only my ninth year of growing roses, having gone from 3 to about 90 plants. I usually have 20 to 25 miniatures,

mostly in pots. They usually don't make it through the winter in pots. But if you are supposed to grow a mini in a pot for the first couple months before putting it in the ground to give it a good start, then it doesn't seem fair to get the bush going and then subject it to the stress of a transplant just when it should be going dormant due to our short growing season. I lost all the minis I had in the ground last winter. I usually have about a dozen hybrid teas and floribunds, mostly for cut flowers, hole filling, and as an annual decoration. Guess I just can't quite give them up. The rest are rugosas, rugosa hybrids, species roses, and roses from the Canadian Explorer series.

There are three roses that do extremely well here. One is our native single, very faint pink wild rose that suckers all over the place. I'm not a big fan of it and do not have it my yard. The other two are 'Hansa' and 'Therese Bugnet'. I actually grew a 'Therese Bugnet' in a raised bed that was about 3 feet off the ground for a couple years, so that tells me it must be real hardy! While I do have a couple 'Hansa' and 'Therese Bugnet', I really want to concentrate on having a wide selection of roses. I have also tried to center my gardening around varieties that other people don't have. The following list includes roses that have survived in my garden. The ones marked with an "*", are plants that are growing against the east side of my house and get some warmth from the foundation.

Alba	Hybrid Rugosas continued:
Felicite Parmentier	Snow Owl
Centifolia	Yankee Lady
Pompon de Bourgogne*	Hybrid Spinosissima
Gallica	William III
Rosa Mundi	Hybrid Tea
Portland	Polarstern@(a climber)
Rose du Roi a Fleurs Pourpres	Kordesii
Hybrid Perpetual	William Baffin (Canadian Explorer)
General Jacqueminot*	Moss
Hybrid Rugosa	Hunslet Moss*
Charles Albanel	Shrub
Dart's Dash	Morden Blush*
Dwarf Pavement	Morden Fireglow*
Delicta*	Species
Hansa	<i>Rosa glauca</i>
F. J. Grootendorst	<i>Rosa rugosa</i> *
Harvest Home*	<i>Rosa rugosa alba</i>
Martin Frobisher*	
Pink Grootendorst	

Here are other roses I have tried growing that I thought might be hardy but either did not survive very long, or they didn't have a fair winter trial. The number in parentheses is the number of summers the rose grew in my yard. It might help you in your quest for hardy roses.

Alba	Hybrid Spinosissima
Pompon Blanc Parfait (3)	Stanwell Perpetual (1)
Centifolia;	Kordesii;
The Bishop (2)	John Davis (Canadian Explorer series) (2)
Floribunda	Champlain (Canadian Explorer series) (1)
Bonica (1)	Moss
Hybrid Alba	Henri Martin (3)-two plants survived
Maidens Blush (2)	three years each but only bloomed once
Hybrid Rugosa	Shrub
Magnifica (3)	Countryman (1)
Red Max Graf (2)	

Growing Roses in Fairbanks

by
Mike Salzman

(Editor's note: this is the second part of a two-part article written by Fairbanksan Mike Salzman, who gardens in the Shannon Park Subdivision off Trainer Gate Road)

What I think is so hard about gardening here is our extremes. The “official” growing season is only 90 days long. One of the first books I picked up on rose growing said to start slacking off on the fertilizing 90 days before the first frost. I laughed to myself thinking by that advice, I should not fertilize my roses at all! However, there's no way to get away with that. Another interesting tidbit about our growing extremes is that Fairbanks receives more daylight in its 90 day growing season than Anchorage does with its 120 day growing season, so any gardening rules from points closer to the equator are only suggested starting points!

Our safe plant date is June 1st and the first frost is September 1st. That short growing season combined with the sudden shift from night time frosts to day time highs in the 80's (F) and low 90's (F) at the end of May and beginning of June can make for a rough start. I'm often faced with a terrible problem in the spring. I have found that one cannot tell a live rose from a dead one.

I'm speaking of the hardier varieties, of course. It is too tempting to shovel and prune right away, as I want live, growing roses in the yard. And for the yard to look nice. I don't want a bunch of “dead” looking plants in the yard waiting to see if they're going to make it or not. Often, it takes 6-8 weeks to tell if a bush is going to make it or not. At that point, if the bush does make it, what kind of shape will it be in going into the winter? If the bush dies all the way back to the roots, then it'll be about the size of a new cutting by the end of our short summer, and I can just about guarantee you that the bush won't make it through the next winter.

When it comes to spring clean up, I will leave my roses to the very last. I want to give them as much chance as possible to show me which is going to grow and which is not. I can't tell you how many roses I have battled to pull them by the roots only to find a new sucker way down on the root. If the rose is hard to pull, then there are suckers coming up. Of course, I now have to make a choice if I want to keep that rose or not. Do I want to have a “hole” in my rose bed for the bush that is growing back from below the roots and won't bloom until next summer or do I just go ahead and pull it and sink a hybrid tea, floribunda, or some other less cold hardy rose?

As for fertilizing, I generally use the alfalfa tea method by soaking alfalfa pellets in water, then using the tea as fertilizer. Our soils are severely lacking in organics, so I figure that the alfalfa can go onto the ground and provide organics and nutrients for the constantly growing plants. Last summer, I experimented with putting alfalfa pellets on the ground directly and not bothering with the alfalfa tea in an attempt to save some wear and tear on my arms lugging buckets of tea around. The roses didn't seem to grow as well. But then again, we had a cool, rainy summer.

Another problem that I suspect we have here is that August tends to be a rainy month. However, while we may get rain in August and maybe September before the snows fly, it might not be enough to keep the rose bushes going strong into the winter. With the temperatures being cooler, the ground may seem wet because it is not warm enough to evaporate the moisture. What might seem like adequate rain is just not enough to keep the bushes going. So, the past two falls, I have watered even though there is dew on the grass and everyone else has put their hoses away for the winter. Last spring, my rose bushes seemed to be in better shape than in the past.

I have tried wintering over my potted roses indoors, with mixed success. My garage and crawl space are too warm for the roses to go dormant. I have a sunroom on the west side of my house and that is where the potted roses go sometime in September when I feel that they are dormant and it is still easy for me to get to the pots before the snow flies. There were two problems with the sunroom. The temperature fluctuated too much. The sunroom is heated, but it is not as well insulated as the house and there is only one zone/thermostat in the house. The sunroom cools off faster than the house. On the flip side, when spring starts to come, that western exposure puts a lot of heat into the sunroom/house. The other problem has been trying to keep the roses watered for the winter. With the long winter, they will die if I don't water them. And too much water means I have a wet floor. I had some metal carts with wheels and drip pans built last summer so I only have to move the carts in and out instead of each pot individually. The drip pans let me give the roses more water without the messy floor. Also, the carts let me get the roses out of the sunroom and onto the driveway/garage earlier in the spring.

I have read how people on the East Coast seem to be able to winter their potted roses indoors with little or no fuss. I suspect that is because their climate is a little more humid and their roses are indoors for a much shorter time period (a couple months versus over half a year). I find it interesting that the more I try to coddle my potted roses indoors, my success rate has gone down.

As for wintering over roses outdoors, I leave it up to the “snow gods.” If the roses make it, they make it. If not, I get to try some new ones. I don't mulch the roses over as I don't have the room to store that much mulch during the summer. Also, it would be too much work and stress on my arms to bury them and then dig them out in the spring. One of the nursery owners

told me a couple years ago that the mulch would have to come off in layers in the spring as that much mulch does freeze solid in the winter. I did try the chicken wire straw method one year – too much work, very messy, and too many weeds for the next couple years. I also heard a horror story of someone who had the unfortunate luck of having voles scurry along under the snow, attracted to the straw, and sheared their roses off at ground level!

I also tried the Minnesota tip method with one rose as an experiment where the roses are buried completely with soil or compost in winter. It was probably not a fair test, especially since it was a yellow rose, but the rose did not make it. Once again, it would be too much work to bury all my roses and have to dig them up in the spring. Nor do I want to allocate that much room to burying them. So, the only real method for me is to let them stand the test of the winter.

I have thought about putting a box of insulation over the roses. I see several hurdles. One, I like to keep my wheelchair off the lawn once the snow starts to fly, I don't want to kill the lawn to save a couple roses. It's a lot harder to reseed the lawn than to replant a couple roses. Also, I could just see the box getting too warm in the spring without me having a way to wade through the snow to open/close the box. And there is that nasty storage issue of all those boxes in the summer months.

I have heard of people who go out and move snow from one part of their yard to cover their roses, but to me that is like taking soil out of a rose bed to mulch the roses over. By using rose bed soil, you expose the rose roots to more of the cold. If the roots don't survive, the rest of the plant won't either. Again, I would rather not expose the lawn to cold and have to reseed again in the spring. Also, our snow comes an inch or two at a time and takes several months to build up to a decent depth. At that point I would have done too much damage to the lawn, or the snow is too deep for me to get to my roses.

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