

Rose Rhetoric October 2011 by *Rich Baer*, Master Rosarian

I have had the privilege to talk to a great number of rose growers this summer. Among several of them there has been a certain theme. Several have said that they have turned to a totally organic approach this year and have had much better roses than they have had in the past. I am really glad that people are starting to think about the environment in a very positive way, such that they are trying to do the best that they can to keep from doing any environmental degradation. On the other hand, almost everyone with whom I have had serious conversations about their roses, have related that their roses have looked better and have been more disease free than at any time they can remember. Environment means everything to those plants and animals that live in what nature offers 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I have suggested that the wonderful looking roses this year may have been due to the very cold spring. Remember we had no roses for the rose show in June. Even though we had plenty of rain which encourages blackspot, we had relatively low temperatures. Blackspot likes temperatures between 64-77 degrees for best development. Rarely did we have any days close to the ideal. By the time our daily temperature warmed up enough to promote black spot, it was no longer raining so the foliage was not wet. After proposing this explanation, another possibility was hypothesized to me. That was that it may have rained so much that on a routine basis all of the blackspot spores that were being spread around by the rain were being washed off the plants by the continuous rain. Whatever it was, the blackspot, according to most rose gardeners, was just not as much of a problem as it has been in the past. In my own garden I used preventative sprays during the early cold season because I wanted to make sure my garden looked pretty, (roses had leaves), for a major charity event that was staged in the garden. (We did have leaves!) Because I did spray, I could not tell if there was any significant difference in our garden. If you have very little black spot because of applied sprays or if you have very little due to the unusual weather, it looks the same. So it looks like we will have to wait for another year to see if the organic approach really affected the black spot, or if it was the weather. In reality we will not really know for sure because each garden will be different and none of them will be conducting controls to see what it is that is truly affecting the outcome they are seeing.

I have a small concern about some of the advice that I routinely read from around the nation. Lately there has been a new term introduced into the vocabulary of roses that really makes no sense and to me and makes understanding roses more confusing, that term is "leafset". Roses have leaves like almost all other plants. In nature leaves are produced such that they are either simple or compound. A simple leaf is like a maple leaf or an apple leaf. Simple leaves have their surface as one surface. Compound leaves have their surface divided into more than one part. Compound leaves are further divided into two types. One is called palmately compound. In this type of leaf all of the leaflets (subdivisions of the leaf) are attached to the tip of the petiole. Common examples of this are the Horse Chestnut, and the Virginia Creeper vine which is common around the city. The other type of compound leaf is called pinnately compound and this is what roses display. The number of leaflets in a pinnately compound leaf can vary greatly. In a rose there can be as few, as one to examples where there may be 15 or more. There will always be an odd number of leaflets as they appear in pairs along the petiole and there is one at the end. (Check a rose leaf if you are not sure about what this looks like.) There are lots of plants that have pinnately compound leaves besides roses, such as walnuts and locusts. Notice in this discussion that we have not used the term "leafset".

I went to the internet to see what I could find about the term “leafset” and almost 100 percent of the time that “leafset” was used was in relation to how many leaflets were on certain marijuana plants. I am not sure if the term originated there or if marijuana growers have just accepted it as a normal term to describe their plant’s leaves. In actuality marijuana (*Cannabis sativa*) is a plant that has palmately compound leaves with one to many leaflets.

The point that I would like to espouse is that roses have leaves, albeit those leaves may have various number of leaflets. One rose leaf is one rose leaf; it is not a “leafset”. If we were to talk about leafset on a rose it would refer to the total number of leaves that a plant may have produced at any one time. A well-developed plant may be referred to as having a “really good leafset” and one that is not healthy “has a poor leafset”. Thus the term “leafset” in referring to a rose is inappropriate since roses have leaves that are comprised of leaflets while an entire bush may have what we refer to as “leafset”.

The end of September and the beginning of October have provided some of the most beautiful days in the garden this year. In our garden the rose plants are all covered with beautiful foliage which shows very little signs of black spot, however there might be a little mildew. The bushes are covered with growing buds that with a few more days of nice weather will turn into a beautiful crop of roses. I have been experiencing a few great roses every day and the camera has been busy trying to capture the beauty. I know it cannot last, so I have been trying to spend as much time enjoying the garden as my life will allow. Rain is scheduled to come later this week, but maybe it will stay nice. Because I have some lovely foliage on my plants, I may apply a fungicide to help get them through what is surely coming soon, weather that is great for black spot. I really do not want to see any of that this year.

When cooler weather begins settling over the rose garden, the rose gardener begins seeking advice on how to insure the future health of the roses. Unfortunately, the gardener may turn to sources which he or she has come to trust. Often these sources will completely lead him or her astray. Your editor, with 30 plus years of intensive rose training and three higher education degrees in botany, hopefully will lead you in the correct direction. It is not that the advice from the usual sources will cause irreparable harm, although in some cases it may. So let’s look at some of the advice you may see that is, well shall we say, questionable.

One fact that seems to be missed by many rose experts is one that leads to incorrect advice about roses. This one fact that many experts seem unwilling to accept is that modern roses **do not have the ability to become dormant**. This is true of all repeat blooming roses. One time blooming Old Garden Roses have the ability to become dormant for the winter season and do so just like maple trees etc. Modern and repeat blooming roses sacrificed the ability to become dormant when they went through the genetic change that allows them to rebloom. The Devil gave roses the choice, of being able to reproduce every month of the year with the chance that they would be killed by cold weather, or only being able to produce once a year with the ability to withstand the cold. Guess what they took? So when the advice from any source tells you that you must do something to help the rose into dormancy, you know you are about to get some unsound advice.

Bad Advice: Cut few flowers from your bushes at this time of year and if you do cut them, only cut short stems. The reason for doing this is that any cutting done on the rose bush will cause it to produce new growth, and that new growth may be killed by the winter.

Good Advice: Enjoy your roses to the fullest extent possible. If you want to cut roses for the house, take as many as you want and cut stems as long as you like. Yes, it is likely that if warm sunny weather continues the rose will begin to produce new growth right below the cut where you removed the rose just like it always does. Whether this new growth lives or dies during the winter is completely irrelevant because it will be removed when you reduce the size of the bush during spring pruning since it will still be at the top of the bush.

Bad Advice: Do not prune away the dead flowers in the fall. Just remove the petals when they fade. This action allows the roses to produce rose hips (seeds) which is important if you want to help the roses go into dormancy.

Good Advice: Many gardeners take great pride in the way their gardens look, even in the fall. Many roses have grown quite tall during the summer season and will eventually need to be cut back to protect them from the winter winds. So, to keep your garden looking beautiful, continue to remove those spent blooms. You may even want to cut longer stems than you did in the summer which will give you a little head start on cutting back the bushes, which you will probably do later in the season. On the other hand, if you do not want to prune away the dead flowers, removing the dead petals from the plants will keep your garden looking better. You will find that very few hips will develop because most modern roses tend to produce few hips.

Bad Advice: Roses need a rest period so that they will be rejuvenated for the next growing season, so remove the leaves which will signal the rose that it is time to become dormant.

Good Advice: Modern roses that are grown for the floral industry grow and bloom twelve months of the year, and often do this for many years and never get “a rest”. Your roses are the same. However, the cold weather that will come with our winters will cause most of the leaves to fall off our roses. Leaves that remain on the plant through the winter should be removed with spring pruning. Overwintered leaves are basically nonfunctional and are not very pretty, which is the one reason for removing them during spring pruning. There is no reason that leaves should be removed from the plants in the fall. Even while the cold causes leaf loss, the rose plant is not dormant. However, the roses overall growth is slowed to a crawl by the cold weather and short days of winter.

Semi Bad Advice: Make sure that you remove all of the leaves from the rose bed because they will infect your roses with disease in the spring.

Good Advice: Picking up the dead leaves from the rose garden may indeed make the garden look better but it will not reduce the incidence of disease in your garden next year and it is a lot of work. Most rose diseases overwinter on the rose canes (stems) either as active fungal lesions or as spores under the bud scales which are found up and down the rose canes. The reduction of disease in next year’s garden can be accomplished by intervening with fungicides as the rose begins to grow next spring. The spores that have been residing on the stems through the winter move to the new foliage and begin the disease cycle early in the year. Fungicides can stop that process while picking up leaves this fall will not. This is also why a cold winter will often be followed by a year of lighter than usual fungal activity. The canes are killed by the winter and are removed in spring pruning which removes much of the source of fungal infection as well.

Bad Advice: Do not apply any fertilizer with nitrogen in it because this will stimulate the rose to produce new growth. Instead apply a fertilizer with no nitrogen such as a 0-0-10 or 0-10-10, (the first is a potassium only fertilizer, the second is a potassium and phosphorous fertilizer), because these will help the plant into dormancy.

Good Advice: Apply no fertilizer for the rest of the year. The cooler weather and the shorter days are causing the growth of the rose to slow and the colder weather to come will reduce it to almost a standstill. Under these conditions the rose will not be taking any nutrients up from the soil. Any product that you add late in the fall will probably be leached through the root zone into our groundwater, which is not really what we want to do. If you were to apply nitrogen fertilizer at this time of year it would not stimulate new growth in the rose, but longer days and warmer temperatures next spring will be the stimulus for the rose to produce new growth.

We will get around to talking about winter next month. Hopefully we will have an uneventful October of wonderful days to fully enjoy some fall weather. It would be even better if good weather continued through November and into December, after all mother nature should allow us to make up for the spring we did not have, and maybe the way some people saw it the summer we did not have.