

To close out the year, and just in time for “rose pruning season”, on December 10 the SCHS was pleased to have Steve Gerischer present a program on growing roses using organic gardening practices. He focused on the procedures he has personally found to work best in Southern California gardens during the time he has been growing roses without using chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

Gerischer began his professional horticultural career at Smith & Hawken, and then worked at Hortus Nursery in Pasadena until it closed. He has also been designing and installing gardens for many years as the owner of Larkspur Garden Design, and is currently the vice president of the Southern California Horticultural Society.

His program was titled “Mission Possible: Growing Roses Organically”, and Gerischer spoke about the many lessons he’s learned through experience, beginning with how he had very little interest in roses to begin with. It was not until he began working at Smith and Hawken that he began to appreciate them. While working at Hortus, Gerischer was charged with ordering bare root roses and he decided to educate himself about rose history, giving him a greater understanding of their biology and how to grow them successfully. He recommended reading Peter Beales’ *Classic Roses* and *The Rose* by David Austin as excellent resources to learn more about rose-growing history.

Historically speaking, wild roses are non-remontant (once-blooming), and it wasn’t until the late 1700s to early 1800s that repeat bloomers from China were introduced to Europe. Gerischer explained that the bloodlines of these re-bloomers run through today’s garden roses, and that by understanding their nature we can learn how to better cultivate them. Remontant roses are most likely to bloom twice (in spring and in fall) if allowed to grow naturally, given only water and without constant fertilizing. They should “rest” during the summer - when less water is available - so they can re-bloom in the fall. Most modern rose cultivars are grafted onto vigorous rootstock, with the scion selected for its desired qualities (color, size, scent, etc.). However, Gerischer also recommended trying “own root” varieties (available online) which can be very long-lived and are generally healthier.

He spoke next about the growth needs of roses, specifically the nutrients required by all breeds, namely nitrogen (N), phosphorous (P) and potassium (K), whose initials can be found on all commercial

packaging in various ratios. Gerischer has used organically certified brands, recognizable by the OMRI designation, for a variety of reasons during the last 27 years. Not only do the organics allow for a more habitat-friendly garden, by allowing insects (pests as well as beneficials) to appear on the plants, which in turn bring in birds to eat them, but they also contribute to plant health and soil fertility. All of these factors encourage seasonal cycles of growth, dormancy, etc. that build a healthier garden over time, although he did indicate that switching to organics is at first, slower, messier and most likely problematic, which will level off after a few seasons.

During the period of adjustment, you will see more problems and pests appear (such as aphids), but once the plants are weaned off inorganic chemicals, they will strengthen, and instances of pest infestations should reduce significantly. Because plants take up the nitrogen in organic food more slowly, they will not send out lots of tender shoots rapidly, which are what attract more aphids. New growth on organically fed roses usually appears within six weeks, and is more vigorous in resisting pests. For the smaller quantities of aphids that do appear, Gerischer recommended hosing them off with water, or rubbing them off by hand. Typical rose foliage problems can also be mitigated through the use of organics, again, because the plants can develop at a slower pace and thereby increase their own resistance over time. However, he noted two exceptions, chilli thrips and rose rosette disease, which may only respond to chemical pesticides. Finally, for problems with cane borers he advised cutting the cane back until there was no sign of any hole, and then “sealing” the top of the cut with chapstick. Routine care advice included watering well (based on soil type), light mulching twice a year, regular inspections to head off problems, and eliminating weak plants that cannot significantly improve no matter how much effort you expend on them.

To wrap up, Gerischer shared his annual rose chores calendar, beginning with November, when he stops dead-heading, allowing rose hips to form, and thereby signaling the plant to start entering dormancy. In late December and continuing through January, it’s time to strip all the foliage off the plants, as well as remove it from the ground, and then dispose of it (do not compost). Then pruning can occur, and Gerischer gave specific tips for different types

of roses. Once pruned, he feeds them with a sulphur, potassium and magnesium mixture, and then top-dresses with alfalfa meal, to feed plants slowly until his seasonal applications of fertilizer begin in March. Gerischer uses compost, chicken manure, compost tea and fish emulsion. Peak bloom typically occurs around April 15, and from then on he cuts flowers (effectively pruning and encouraging further growth), into early summer. He stops fertilizing his roses in late June, early July, and also slows down on his watering. He resumes feeding and watering in mid-September, in anticipation of fall blooms, and then stops fertilizing in October, so the plants can once again slow down, bringing the year to a close.

You can review this presentation and hear all of Gerischer’s tips, including specific roses he recommends growing, and answers to audience questions, by visiting the SCHS archives on our YouTube channel.

✂ Sabine Steinmetz

To watch this program on YouTube, click the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqiOVYHuzvE>

SCHS MONTHLY GARDEN SHARE

Let’s start the year slowly, but get on to the right track...

- Finish rose pruning & planting (see video link above for tips)
- Cut back grape & berry vines
- Prune fruit trees, including apple, pear & stone fruits
- Rake up/compost deciduous leaves, retaining some leaf mold to protect & feed plant roots
- Continue to reduce irrigation, but deep-water trees if needed
- Clean swales, gutters & drains

✂ Sabine Steinmetz

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