

Is Sustainable Rose Gardening a Possibility?

Sustainability. You hear that term a lot these days – whether in reference to our national financial system, housing, energy, large scale agriculture or the home garden. It's bandied about in various contexts and yet many people are not exactly sure what it means. And even if you understand the concept, how does it relate to a rose garden? Roses are ornamental plants and not generally grown for edible purposes, so you may think it really doesn't apply. But it does. If you love your roses and your planet, you may want to do as much as you can towards implementing a sustainable approach to gardening, even if it's not feasible to reach an absolute level of sustainability.

More than twenty years ago, the World Commission on Environment and Development defined sustainability as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." From a whole earth perspective, it's a good working definition, but a bit lofty for the home gardener. A dictionary's definition states that it is "designating of, or characterized by a practice that sustains a given condition, as economic growth or a human population, without destroying or depleting natural resources, polluting the environment." That definition is somewhat clearer, and gets a little closer to home.

To get a sense of what truly sustainable rose gardening would mean, you'd first need to look at the process of growing a rose - from purchasing a plant to keeping it healthy for years in your garden, considering every point along the way that might destroy or deplete natural resources (energy, water and soil) or pollute the environment (fertilizer, pesticides and waste). There are lots of them. We rose lovers, while reveling in the beauty that our national flower provides, can easily be major consumers of precious resources and big polluters. A sustainable rose gardener would have to address each and every step along the way and find an alternative that would employ more sustainable approaches. For most home gardeners, it's not really feasible.

As gardeners, we are concerned about protecting our precious resources and being good environmental stewards. The good news is there are plenty of steps we can take to implement sustainable gardening practices. Renowned rosarian Robert B. Martin Jr., recently wrote that "Sustainable rose gardening is managing our gardens with minimal effects on the environment. A sustainable rose garden is one that is adapted to and managed without extraordinary demand for chemicals and care while maintaining a healthy balance and emphasis on healthy soil." That description is much clearer – and provides the basis for converting a working definition into actionable steps for the rosarian on the road to sustainable gardening practices. Here are some ideas to start with:



Reduce the use of chemicals

- ✓ Add compost or other organic amendments to soil when planting to build soil and provide nutrients
- ✓ Feed the soil and the plant; encourage earthworms
- ✓ Know what and when to feed your plants
- ✓ Add natural materials to soil for fertilizer rather than synthetic, man-made products
- ✓ Plant disease-resistant plants that don't require treatment with pesticides
- ✓ Tolerate pests as much as possible
- ✓ Encourage beneficial insects to combat pests by providing desired habitats
- ✓ Provide habitat for birds, bats, frogs, toads and other insectivores
- ✓ Maintain good garden sanitation to reduce pests and disease

- ✓ Monitor your plants to catch problems early
- ✓ Utilize an integrated pest management system employing physical, mechanical and biological methods of control before chemical methods
- ✓ Follow the label when using any type of pesticide
- ✓ Use physical or mechanical methods for eliminating weeds rather than herbicides

Conserve water

- ✓ Plant varieties that require less water (EarthKind™ Roses, landscape and shrub roses, old garden roses, rugosas)
- ✓ Use drip systems that provide slow, even watering that penetrates down to the most distant roots
- ✓ Water deeply, less frequently
- ✓ Water when your plant needs it, not according to a fixed schedule
- ✓ Irrigate early in the day minimizes evaporation
- ✓ Install turn-off valves on hose ends and keep them in the off position when not in actual use
- ✓ Find leaks in your irrigation system and repair them, as well as drippy faucets
- ✓ Mulch around plants to reduce evaporation
- ✓ Collect rainwater for irrigation where feasible

Reduce waste

- ✓ Purchase bareroot plants right at a nursery where they're temporarily heeled in, in soil, not packaged in plastic
- ✓ Purchase roses in peat pots that either get planted, or added to the compost pile
- ✓ Recycle plastic containers in your own garden, between friends, or through local nurseries
- ✓ Build a compost pile and use it for your green waste whenever possible
- ✓ Use your community green waste recycling system
- ✓ Purchase soil, mulch and other garden products in bulk, reuse bags and containers
- ✓ Use wood chips from a tree service for walkways or mulch

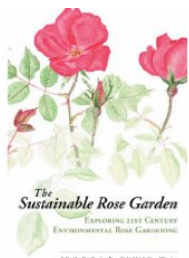
Consume less energy

- ✓ Purchase plants and other garden supplies locally
- ✓ Use manual or battery-powered tools rather than gas
- ✓ Install solar powered garden lighting

Protect the environment

- ✓ Use a wide variety of plants in the garden to promote diversity
- ✓ Store and dispose of chemicals safely
- ✓ Use alternatives to chemically treated wood
- ✓ Use porous paving materials
- ✓ Plant to control soil erosion
- ✓ Correct drainage problems to reduce runoff
- ✓ Create a dry creek, swale or other feature to slow or capture seasonal flowing water

There are some great resources available that can provide more in-depth information on implementing sustainable gardening practices. With a focus on roses, the American Rose Society (ARS) formed the



Good Earth R.O.S.E. Care Committee; articles by Committee members are included in the *American Rose* magazine and on the ARS website (ars.org). *The Sustainable Rose Garden: Exploring 21st Century Environmental Rose Gardening*, edited by Pat Shanley and Peter Kukielski, was published last year as a compilation of short articles by noted rosarians on a range of topics like “Just Say No to Chemicals,” “The Path to Sustainability Is Through the Soil” and “Do Plants Have Natural Defenses Against Disease?” *The Green Gardener’s Guide:*

Simple, Significant Actions to Protect & Preserve Our Planet, by Joe Lamp'1, also came out in 2008 and is brimming with easy to implement ideas. He even includes a short list of roses that are reportedly highly resistant to blackspot and powdery mildew. National Geographic's *Green Guide: The Complete Reference to Consuming Wisely*, includes an informative chapter on "Grow Natural." Closer to home, The Bay-Friendly Gardening Program, a product of the East Bay consortium StopWaste.org, features an easy-to read guide that is loaded with information and how-to instructions. Similarly, the Marin Stormwater Pollution Prevention Program (MCSTOPP.org) is a proponent of the Bay-Friendly Gardening program, and has a web site filled with good information.



So while we may not be able to make rose growing a completely sustainable process, we can all do our part to reduce our environmental impact on it. As gardeners, we can take steps to reduce the escalating and unsustainable rates of consuming precious resources, and at the same time save time and money. And, if you spread the word, sharing what you've learned with friends and family, you can expand the benefits even further. Lamp'1 says in his book, "A favorite quote by Thomas Fuller in 1732 sums it up for me; 'We never know the worth of water till the well is dry'." If each and every one of us takes a few little steps towards sustainable rose gardening, our collective impact can be significant.

By Nanette Londeree, Master Consulting Rosarian

Photo of 'The Fairy', an EarthKind™ Rose, courtesy of Regan Nursery website