

HANDLING TIPS FOR VALENTINE'S DAY ROSES

If you are fortunate enough to receive roses from a loved one this Valentine's Day, follow these guidelines to help extend the life of your flowers.

For floral arrangements:

1) Keep the vase filled or floral foam soaked with warm water. Add fresh, warm water daily. If the water turns cloudy, replace it immediately. If possible, recut stems by removing one to two inches with a sharp knife. Do this under water. This lets the stems to draw in water instead of air.

2) Keep flowers in a cool spot (65 to 72 degrees Fahrenheit), away from direct sunlight, heating or cooling vents, directly under ceiling fans, or near radiators.

3) If a rose starts to wilt, remove it from the arrangement, and recut the stem under water. Submerge the entire rose in warm water. The rose should revive in one to two hours.

For loose stems:

1) If you can't get your flowers in a food solution right away, keep them in a cool place.

2) Fill a clean, deep vase with water and add the flower food obtained from your florist. Be sure to follow the directions on the package.

3) Remove leaves that will be below the waterline. Leaves in water will promote bacterial growth.

4) Recut stems under water with a sharp knife and place the flowers in the vase solution you've prepared.

Fertilizing Spring-flowering Bulbs

The best time to fertilize spring-flowering bulbs is when foliage emerges in the spring rather than at flowering. Traditionally, gardeners have applied fertilizer during bloom or a bit after, but because bulb roots start to die at flowering, fertilizer applied at bloom is wasted. Roots are active when the foliage first pokes through the ground. Nutrients applied then help the plant produce flowers the following year. If bulbs have been fertilized in the past, there is often plenty of phosphorus and potassium in the soil. It is best to use a soil test to be certain. If the soil needs phosphorus and potassium, use a complete fertilizer (such as 10-10-10, 9-9-6, etc.) at the rate of 2.5 lbs. per 100 square feet. This would equal 1 rounded teaspoon per square foot. If phosphorus and potassium are not needed, blood meal makes an excellent fertilizer. It should be applied at the rate of 2 lbs. per 100 square feet or 1 teaspoon per square foot. Lawn fertilizers such as a 27-3-3 or 30-3-3 can be used, but cut the rate by a third. Also make sure the lawn fertilizer does not contain a weed preventer or weed killer. Remember to leave the foliage until it dies naturally. The energy in the foliage is transferred to the bulb as the foliage dies and will help bloom next year.

Pruning Overgrown Apple Trees

Apple trees that are not pruned for several years will often produce so many branches that little energy is left for fruit production. Overgrown apple trees are also difficult to harvest and spray. Gardeners who have such a tree are often at a loss as to how to get it back in shape.

Often the best recommendation for such a tree is to make one pruning cut at ground level and start over with a new tree. However, trees may have sentimental value that will make the fix worth the time and effort. Realize that this will be a multi-year process because no more than 30 percent of the tree should be removed in one year. Here are some steps to follow:

1. Remove all dead wood. This does not count toward the 30 percent.

2. Remove suckers from the base of the tree.

3. Choose approximately six of the best branches to keep as scaffold branches.

Remove all others. Branches should be cut flush to the branch collar. The collar is the natural swelling that occurs where a branch connects to the trunk or to a larger branch. Removing the collar would leave a larger wound that would take additional time to heal. Do not paint wounds. Wounds heal more quickly if left open. Candidates for removal include branches with narrow crotch angles, which are more likely to break in wind and ice storms, and those that cross branches you will save. This may be all that is possible the first year if the 30 percent threshold has been reached.

4. Thin the branches on each scaffold branch. Remove crowded branches to open up the tree to light and allow humidity to escape. Shorten each scaffold branch by cutting back to a side branch. When you are through, the tree should have enough wood removed so that a softball can be thrown through the tree. Severe pruning often will cause an apple tree to produce vigorous side shoots from the trunk called water sprouts. Main branches will also produce suckers that grow straight up. The suckers and water sprouts should be removed throughout the growing season so the center of the tree stays open.

Soil Temperature and Vegetables

One of the most neglected tools for vegetable gardeners is a soil thermometer. Soil temp is a much better measure of when to plant than air temperature or the calendar. Planting when soil is too cool can cause seeds to rot and transplants to sit there. A number of vegetables can germinate and grow at cool temperatures. For example, peas will germinate and grow well at a soil temp of 40 F. Though lettuce, parsnips, and spinach can sprout at a soil temperature of 35 F, they prefer at least 45 F for best germination and growth. Radishes also do well at a soil temperature of 45 F. Warm-season crops such as tomatoes, sweet corn and beans prefer at least 55 F for germination (or transplanting), but others such as peppers, cucumbers, melons and sweet potatoes need it even warmer, about 60 F. Taking soil temperature accurately is a bit of a science. First, use a metal soil thermometer, which is sold in many garden and hardware stores. Take temperature 2.5 inches deep at about 10 to 11 a.m. Temperature variations throughout the day and night affect soil temperature, with lowest readings after dawn and warmest around mid-afternoon. The late-morning reading gives a good average temperature. If taking the soil temperature at this time is not practical, take a reading before you leave for work and a second when you return home and use the average. Also be sure to get a consistent reading for four to five days in a row before planting, and make sure a cold snap is not predicted.