

MARCH ROSE GROWING

*Written by Henry Seiler, the 3rd installment of 12 articles he wrote in 2008 for The Pensacola Rose Newsletter. Henry received the “**Award of Merit**” for Rose Growing Series from The American Rose Society for these 12 articles.*

Well Gulf Coast Rosarians, wasn't February a great month for working in the garden. There were enough dry sunny days in the middle of the month to allow us to get our pruning done on time and just enough rain to moisten the soil. Actually we are about an inch above normal in rainfall for February and about an inch overall above normal for the year. And what about our extra day this year, February 29th? I made sure to make good use of every single minute of that day. Every year should have a February 29th. I think most local rosarians have their major pruning completed by now. I started on February 7th and finished February 21st. My right hand and wrist are swollen and my fingers are numb. **Ryan Tilley** who edits the “**Georgia Rose**” newsletter recommends purchasing an **electric pruner** if we are going to be spending a lot of time pruning. To quote Ryan: “If I would have had these pruners 10 years ago, I likely could have avoided many of the hand and arm problems I have experienced. Now these pruners are really expensive but so is hand surgery. And hand pain is no fun either. Trust me, these pruners are a must if you spend a lot of time pruning”. The type that Ryan uses, which he purchased on line, is the **Pellenc Lixion** which costs about \$1,500.

If you haven't pruned your roses yet you'd better get started. You don't want your bushes to waste energy on new growth that will soon be pruned off. Although our major pruning is done around the middle of February, a different type of pruning is scheduled for March. Welcome to **March Madness**. The March pruning doesn't require as much physical energy as it is more of a precision-type pruning using simply one's fingertips. It could be summed up in the cliché “nip it in the bud”. This is when we remove unwanted buds before they get started. This is important as it shapes our bushes for the new growing season by selecting which buds stay and which ones go. It's been called “**finger-tip pruning**”, “**thumb pruning**”, and “**touch-up pruning**”. It could also be called the “**fine tuning**” of rose growing. First of all, recheck your bushes to see that you didn't miss something the first time around in February. I noticed last week that I had completely missed one small bush. Leaving old foliage gives blackspot fungus and spider mites a place to hide. All old foliage should be stripped off by now. When the new bud eyes begin to grow, using your fingers, **remove all inside buds**. This prevents canes from growing to the inside of the bush, keeping the inside open for good air circulation. Rub out the weaker outside buds, leaving only the strongest ones to grow and mature into canes that will eventually produce roses. Also you may notice that each bud eye usually sends out three buds, a large one in the center and two smaller ones

on either side. Rub out the two smaller side buds leaving only the larger center bud to grow and mature. Now, when the remaining buds grow into canes and begin to form flower buds you will notice that most varieties will have a tendency to produce two, three or sometimes a spray of flower buds. This is when we remove all lesser flower buds, leaving only the strongest one which will result in one bloom per stem. This is referred to as **disbudding**. With floribundas, you may want to do the opposite. Remove the larger central bud and allow the others to grow uniformly into a “**spray**”. Finger pruning is really underemphasized. But it is very important in shaping our bushes for the future, and especially important in getting newly planted bushes off on the right track. And as our bushes grow and approach their first bloom cycle continue to remove blind shoots and other spindly, non-productive growth and keep the center of the bush open. Blind shoots do not form flower buds and are therefore considered nonproductive. An excessive amount of this growth, especially in the center of the bush, encourages fungus diseases and serves as a home for spider mites. Many experienced rosarians pinch the flower buds from first year bushes and prevent them from blooming for the first two cycles. They pinch to the second 5 leaflet leaf when the buds are the size of tiny peas. This conserves energy and helps build the bush during the first season of growth, as flower production, especially in the spring, requires a great expenditure of energy.

Now, enough for pruning, let's talk about spraying. This should be the last month for “**dormant sprays**” and “**cleanup sprays**”, those types using **dormant oils**, **lime-sulfur** and **copper salts** and no more using fungicides and miticides at double strength. Over the past few years I had gotten away from dormant sprays as can be witnessed by the **scale infected canes** I discovered at pruning. We don't talk much about **scale insects** on roses but they have become a nuisance and they are difficult to get rid of. And, if left alone, they will zap the energy from your bush. I never had scale back when I included insecticide in my weekly spray. But then I was fighting spider mites all year long. When I visited Sam Renfro's garden last spring he mentioned that he had just been through a battle with rose scale. He sprayed three straight weeks with **Volck oil** and **Merit**. So that's what I am doing at this time. About the first week in March I'll start my regular weekly spray program alternating **Banner Maxx** and **Manzate** with **Compass** and **Daconil Ultrex**. I didn't really do a lot of spraying this winter as was evidenced by the **blackspot** I removed at pruning time. I also noticed **spider mites** on several of the bushes. Last year I saw symptoms of the deadly fungus disease that caused the Great Irish Famine nearly a hundred and fifty years ago. Yes, a few bushes had symptoms of **downy mildew**, more common to greenhouse roses and rose gardens in certain parts of California but occasionally seen in rose gardens in Alabama and Florida. It's not white like **powdery mildew** and not even downy looking at all. It's red, purple and black and causes rapid necrosis (death) of tissues. Purple blotches on leaves and stems are the early symptoms. **Subdue (Ridomil)**, **Alliette** or the new

Stature DM sprayed at seven day intervals are recommended for controlling it. Then as the temps rise above 80 degrees, Mother Nature will take care of it. But we can't stop spraying then because that's when **blackspot** becomes a threat. So, we want to start the new rose season with a resolution to spray our bushes weekly to prevent the spread of fungus diseases. Although **Rubigan** is the best for prevention of **powdery mildew**, most rosarians do a good job using **Banner Maxx** and **Manzate**. Powdery Mildew has never been a major problem for us in Florida as it is for those on the west coast and other regions of the country. If you have trouble purchasing **Banner Maxx** and **Compass**, other fungicides like **Cleary's 3336**, **Funginex** or **Triforine** can be substituted. Or look for one of the **Ortho**, **Bayer**, **Security** or **Hi-Yield** products in the local garden centers that contains the generic equivalents. **Banner Maxx** contains **Propiconazole**; **Compass** contains **Trifloxystrobin**; **Cleary's 3336** contains **Thiophanate-methyl**; and **Daconil** contains **Chlorothalonil**. **Phaltan**, unfortunately, is no longer available. That was the best fungicide I used when I started growing roses in the early seventies. Then came **Benlate**. It was new and much more expensive. But was it better? It was better for west coast rosarians whose only acquaintance with blackspot was seeing pictures of it in magazines. But for Gulf Coast rosarians, it did little in controlling our number one nemesis. Research money goes into developing preventatives and cures for various types of mildew and other fungal diseases of turf grass and food crops. **Blackspot** is more of an **orphan disease** with no true drug of its own. It just so happens that some of the chemicals like the ones mentioned above that were developed for the control of diseases on other plants are also effective to some degree in controlling blackspot. Remember, blackspot is specific to roses. Other plants don't get blackspot. Some chemicals that were never marketed for roses were used sort of illegally, to treat blackspot, like our darling of the late 80's and early 90's. It was like a rosarian's dream come true in those days. You only had to spray once a month for complete blackspot control. And since it had never been approved for roses made it extra cool to be able to get it and use it. It would come packaged in little baggies and everyone would whisper when talking about it, sometimes referring to it by an alias name. But our romance with **Sentinel** was short lived as it was suddenly pulled from the market and never replaced with an alternate that lived up to its performance. The closest thing we have to **Sentinel** at the present time is **Banner Maxx** which is supposed to provide disease control for two weeks and I think you could probably get by spraying every two weeks during dry seasons. But don't try to stretch it to longer than two weeks. Now, if you stretch your spraying to longer than two weeks and you begin to see signs of blackspot, don't think that doubling up on the dosage will kill the disease or give you added protection. All it will do is burn the foliage. Don't increase the dosage above what is recommended. It's better to combine fungicides than to increase the dosage of any given one.

Avid has relieved much of the pressure from spider mites. But it must be used at 1/3 tsp. per gal. every 2 or 3 weeks when mites are threatening. It works even better when combined with **Floramite** which is expensive but you don't need much as ¼ teaspoon per gallon of water is the recommended dosage.

Be on alert for insect damage but don't be trigger happy with insecticides. Not only are they toxic to other forms of animal life, they also tend to kill the natural predators (the good guys) that are trying to keep the pests (the bad guys) in check. We don't want to upset the delicate balance if at all possible. We need to keep as many of the "good guys" around as possible. For example, don't get too nervous about a few aphids. I like to give the lady beetles a chance. If the lady beetles don't show up or they don't have an appetite for aphids I get out the **Merit**. Aphids are the easiest to eradicate. **Malathion** used to do a good job on them. It smells bad but it is the least toxic. But the new super aphids don't seem to respond to anything but **Merit**. And don't be guilty of aphid overkill. Quit shooting when there's no more enemy to kill. Don't waste the bullets. You may kill some of the good guys while the bad guys are building up a tolerance. We'll talk more about insect control in future issues, like protecting our buds and blooms from **bud worms** and **thrips**. For now we have to concentrate on protecting our foliage from 1) **blackspot**, 2) **mildew**, and 3) **spider mites**.

March is also the month that we start our fertilization program for the new rose year. I always recommend applying **organics** in February but most people wait until early March when the soil begins to warm up a bit. I see that the **Espoma Rose Tone** has really grown in popularity. It makes it easy to have everything premixed. I use **Espoma Plant Tone** or **Purely Organic** but modify it by mixing other types of organics with it, including **cottonseed meal**, **fish meal**, **blood meal** and sometimes **kelp meal**. All of these can be purchased at **Barnes Feed Store**. They used to carry the dry Long Horn Cattle Manure but I haven't seen it lately. I also apply **alfalfa meal** and **milorganite** separately. I had thoughts of using **rabbit manure** and **mushroom compost** this spring but never got around to checking on it.

Around the first of March apply one cup of a high nitrogen granular fertilizer like **Red Fox (16-4-8)** or **Lesco (17-3-11)** around each bush and water in well. Or one cup of **ammonium nitrate (34-0-0)** and ½ cup of **SulPoMag**. I will substitute sulfur coated **urea (38-0-0)** for the ammonium nitrate. The sulfur coated urea is very similar to ammonite but takes longer to release. The ammonium nitrate (ammonite) provides a quick fix of nitrogen which the roses need to get them started. One cup of dolomite lime per bush is also recommended to help keep the pH in check. Try to keep the pH as close as possible to 6.5. Most rosarians in our area maintain this monthly fertilization program with a complete granular fertilizer through the first of November. It is always best to choose a brand of fertilizer which includes a good supply of trace minerals. If you have a limited number of roses, you may want to apply ½ cup of fertilizer every two

weeks along with ½ cup of lime. Also, along with your first application of granular fertilizer, apply about 2 cups of **alfalfa meal or pellets**, ½ cup of **Epsom salts**, and 2 Tbsp. of **Perk (trace minerals)** per bush.

Now, in addition to the monthly or biweekly schedule using a dry granular fertilizer, it seems that many Pensacola rosarians have gotten their roses addicted to the more expensive liquid stuff. Or maybe the ROSARIANS themselves have become addicted to the beautiful green foliage and the super large blooms that result. Some exhibitors completely neglect granular fertilizer and feed weekly with the liquid formula. If I had just a few bushes I would try this approach myself. But, applying it biweekly is all that I have the time and energy for as I don't have an automatic injector system. I try to apply liquid fertilizer every two weeks from March 15 through November. For the first two feedings I would recommend a high nitrogen formula as **Peters 30-10-10 or 20-20-20**. In a 32 gallon garbage can, mix 2 cups of the **Peters** or **Miracle Grow**, 2 cups of **fish emulsion** and 1 cup of **Sequestrene 330 chelated iron**. Fill with water and apply one gallon around each bush. Apply less to potted roses and minis. For the next two feedings, switch to a high phosphate formula as Fertilome **Super Bloom 9-59-8**. After the first bloom cycle, switch back to the **20-20-20** or **Miracle Grow 15-30-15**. **K-Gro 15-30-13** occasionally goes on sale. Water well before applying these liquid fertilizers. Remember that water makes things happen. Start gathering materials to add to your mulch. Warm weather comes quickly. And a nice thick insulating mulch is necessary for keeping the roots cool and moist. It cuts down on weeds and adds to the organic material of the soil. All types of material can be used, including pine needles, pine bark and oak leaves. This may also be a good time to stake our bushes while they are easy to work with. Happy St.Patrick's Day, Happy Easter and **Happy Rose Growing in March**.