

Just the Basics, Please!
By Patsy Williams in the *Houston Rose-ette*, Jan. 2009

There is still time to build that rose bed that you have been thinking about. A new bed needs time to settle, blend and mellow before it is planted. Stirring or tilling it along the way will speed up the process.

Location: Select a location where the roses will receive at least six hours of sun a day, away from fences and existing buildings, and trees. Tree roots will become a major problem when beds are located too close. Eventually the tree roots will find the rose bed, because it is a water and food source.

Drainage: Raised beds are strongly recommended for heavy clay soil. We build our rose beds on top of the clay so that the bed will drain. While roses like to be kept moist, they do not like to stand in water. We build our beds about twelve inches high. A popular method is three landscape timbers high. Landscape timbers are not treated as well as they used to be, and now they deteriorate faster. The method that you choose to raise the bed is your own preference.

Bed size: Any shape can be made into a bed. It is recommended that roses be planted no more than two deep, back-to-front of beds. Remember that they have thorns, and it is hard to get to any that might be in the middle, if you plant more than two deep. It is also recommended that your feet are kept out of the rose bed. Rose feeder roots grow near the surface of the soil, and you do not want to pack the soil by walking on it. A packed soil also causes nitrogen loss. A single row of roses requires three feet of bed width between the timbers, and a double row should be five feet wide.

After you have decided the location and laid out the bed, 10 to 12 thicknesses of newspapers can be placed over the existing grass to kill it. Be careful to overlap the paper, and make sure that you poke no holes in it; grass will grow through any holes that occur. Your soil mix can now be carefully added to your bed. In our early years we stripped the grass, because we always had some place where the grass was needed.

Soil mixture: HRS recommends a mix of 1/3 top soil, 1/3 sharp sand (builders sand), and 1/3 organic material (manure, compost, finely ground pine bark, etc.) The pH should be 6.5 or slightly above. There are also good mixes that can be purchased from soil lots. (I like to add an additional amount of compost to my bed mixture.)

Additives: For a 100 square foot bed add 25 lbs. of gypsum, 10 lbs. of superphosphate or bone meal, 5 lbs. of complete commercial rose food, and 25 lbs. of alfalfa pellets. Stir or till this into the bed. (If you used the newspaper routine, be careful not to dig or till too deeply.) These additives will feed existing soil microbes in the bed and replace nitrogen which might be used by partially decomposed products.

Wait: So you have made your bed early: now comes the waiting period while the bed mells and settles.

Planting: The last half of March or early to mid-April is a good time to plant roses, especially bare root roses. If you have ordered bare root roses, request that they be shipped to arrive just before you are going to plant them. They should be soaked in water overnight to rehydrate them before planting. They can be planted directly into the garden or into pots for planting later. Remember, new growth is tender and is susceptible to freezes.

Kent's note: I have edited this excellent piece by Patsy Williams of Houston to suit our conditions here. Regarding the section on additives in a new bed, they are needed only if you are going to fill the bed with new plantings of bare root or potted roses. Then you would add nothing to the individual holes as you normally do with replacement plants.