

HAPPY ROSES

By: Ted W. Mills, ARS Consulting Rosarian and Judge

It was a happy occasion to listen to a talk made recently by John Hefner, the American Rose Society's premier rose show exhibitor. No other individual has won more Queens than has this talented rosarian. Getting to learn from John about roses is like sitting at the feet of Thomas Edison to study inventing.

One of the many things I learned from Hefner intrigued me immensely. He spoke of having "happy roses" in his beautiful rose garden. Although I had used those two words frequently in letter salutations and closings, it never occurred to me to realize what I was saying. John Hefner filled that mental gap clearly as he spoke of the gaiety that his own roses enjoy.

Let's ponder a few moments the term, "happy roses." It requires fantasizing on our part but the exercise might prove beneficial in our quest to learn more about rose culture.

To direct the rosarian on this fantasy trip I begin at the entrance to my own rose garden. Standing as a sentinel at the driveway is a tree rose called Easy Going. This rose serves as a premise to what our rose tour implies -- enjoying the hobby in an easy fashion rather than deeming it a tiring chore.

Next to Easy Going the beautiful rose, Weight Watchers Success, resides. A recent tour of the garden by over 200 visitors chose this rose as the garden's star performer. It must have brought fond memories to the ladies who successfully "slimmed down" in weight.

Throughout the garden, "happy faces" greeted the onlookers in a rainbow of colors. These beautiful specimens did not accidentally grow to such brilliance. The roses' happy attitudes occurred because the rosarian applied the proper care to ensure their optimum success. It is these culture steps that we seek to convey to our readers.

Since all living creations require a healthy diet to perform at their best, it behooves the rosarian to provide the food that will best nourish the roses. Just as the newborn infant requires that parents transport the milk bottle to their mouth, so it is with the rose bush. Stacks of fertilizer left in the garage or garden shed will never increase the "happiness" of the rose bush. The rosarian must apply it where the root system can ingest it. If I notice that my roses are not responding well to my fertilizing, I know that the pH factor must be out of kilter. Prompt application of lime will raise the pH while sulfur will lower the reading. "Happiness" is obtained when the pH registers between 6 and 6.5.

Although roses will sing for joy when at least six hours of sunlight is present, there are times in summer months when too much heat reaches the bushes. Stressful "attitudes" creep in and the "happy" mood departs. It is at this time that the rosarian must leap to the rescue by providing a hosing of water to the suffering plants. A cool shower of water will return a smile to the bush and the roses will clap for joy with every sprinkle that touches them.

A heavy rain that is followed by a scorching sun will sometimes cause the soil to "bake" and

become compacted. Also, if the rosarian, through carelessness, tramples the rose bed while attending the bushes, he or she will create soil compaction. It is then that the rose bushes begin to experience "unhappiness." Why? The vital commodities of water and air are denied the plant since soil compaction restricts their flow to the root system. To return bushes to a happy mood simply aerate the soil with a pitchfork or like tool. Pliable soil provides the perfect home for the bush.

Have you ever toured a rose garden that is sadly in need of deadheading? Bushes are not "happy" unless they can portray their finest appearance. Although they realize that their ultimate obligation is to provide seed pods for future rose generations, they, like the girls at the prom, are happiest when they display a pretty appearance. Deadheading promptly allows the bush to put on its new wardrobe.

If I were to list the activity that creates more happiness to the rose bush it would have to be the regular application of water. In fact it ranks ahead of supplying food for the plant. Neglecting this facet of rose growing spells doom. Failure to water brings "sadness" to the plant that will cast a pall over it that is frightening. As the water reaches the thirsty root system, one can almost hear the bushes applauding the provider.

I promise you that roses will not always experience happiness. Just as humans are struck with illness and predators, rose bushes are struck as well with sickness and enemies in the form of insects. When misfortune does strike, we must promptly remedy the situation and thus restore health and "happiness." Of course it is better to establish preventive measures. People are not happy when they don't feel well and neither do our revered roses. Returning them to good health will create more "happiness" than we can imagine. There are various remedies for rose diseases and insect attacks. It behooves the rosarian to acquaint himself or herself with the most effective "medicines" available.

Back to John Hefner. One of the many reasons John is so successful in exhibiting roses is the fact that he grooms excellently. He knows that a specimen at its optimum stage of beauty exemplifies a "happy rose" on the show table. Just as the mother of a bride skillfully adjusts her daughter's veil and gown before the ceremony, so does the good exhibitor clean the foliage and primp the rose petals to highlight the beauty of the rose entered. Every exhibitor should follow John's example and groom well. "Happy" roses and happier rosarians will be the result.

Yes, roses can experience happiness if given a little help from the rosarian. Consequently, when roses are "happy" a merry atmosphere is prevalent in the rosarian's household. This rose - growing hobby can be a journey of pure bliss. All too often the public concurs that raising roses is too difficult. We must dispel that notion. It requires but a bit of willingness to assist nature in the growing process. The reward is great and the pleasure that is derived from producing blue -ribbon blooms is well worth the effort. Everyone loves the sight of beautiful roses. Let us, as dedicated rosarians, convert that viewing-only procedure to widespread public involvement in growing these beautiful flowers.

Yes, John Hefner did strike a chord when he spoke of "happy roses." He further kindles a desire in my heart to perform better in my rose growing hobby. I want my roses to be "happy" and I pledge to ensure that they will leap for joy in the coming season.

Thank you, John.

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