

“Horse Whisperer Turned Rose Whisperer”

“I couldn’t be happier with the way I grow roses now—I’ll never go back to those older, labor-intensive methods,” says Don Gill.

How would you like to be finished with your rose cultivation by mid-April, and spend the rest of the growing season, until the end of November, cutting long-stemmed roses by the dozens, enjoying rose bushes laden with Queen quality blooms and buds, and putting in less than one hour weekly? Don Gill’s care of 150 roses during the summer and fall means spraying them twice a month, and the rest of the time he spends in his garden enjoying the beauty of his roses, preparing scores of on-coming Queen for rose shows, and giving away as many of the finest quality, straight-stemmed roses as possible to appreciative neighbors, friends, and family. “And,” he says, “I literally throw away wheel barrow-loads of top-quality roses that had bloomed out on the bush.”

How did Don Gill transform his rose growing methods from laborious work to pleasure-enhancing enjoyment of the full rewards that roses can offer? Don will say in an instant, “Growing roses on Fortuniana understock has opened the windows and doors to whole new ways of approaching rose growing.” And what he learned from growing Hybrid Teas (and some Miniatures) on Fortuniana rootstock he is now applying to all of his roses, including floribundas and shrubs growing other stocks and on their own roots.

“What I have learned is what the roses tell me they need and not what the more traditional “experts” say they need.” Don Gill is a horse trainer by profession. He trains young thoroughbred horses for show and steeplechasing. He listens to the horses and they tell him which they had rather be. You may say that Don is a “rose whisperer,” and the roses whisper to Don what they want. He hears and they flourish, profusely so. Both gardener and garden are happy with the results.

Like those gentler methods of horse training, Don’s rosegrowing methods are controversial, but also like his wining horses, “You can’t argue (too long) with success.” And Don and Sara Jo, his wife, gardening and showing partner, have won top awards in district and national shows. Don’s methods work, and they are worth paying attention to. Perhaps we can listen to Don’s quiet whispers when he speaks of his love of roses and learn from him methods that may take the drudgery out of rose care and discover the season-long love and pleasure that roses strive to offer. So, perhaps we can quiet those voices of the “experts” in our heads and listen for a moment to Don Gill.

First of all, like the winning horse trainer that he is, Don sought after the best, most productive rose stock he could find. His listening and reading led him to try (controversially for a cold-winter place like Nashville, or for that matter, for any weather zone north of Florida or the Gulf Coast) Fortuniana rootstock roses. Convinced of their superior potential from all the heard, he went “down south” to find out for himself. More than two years ago, Don first wrote about what he saw in **Johnny Becnel’s** garden in south Louisiana as eye-popping and breath-taking (see Don Gill’s articles in two previous issues of *The Rose Leaf*, October 2001 and August 2002). And Johnny Becnel was not

the common rose “expert.” In fact he also questioned the experts. For thirty years Johnny had grown roses with astounding success by not listening to experts but to the roses and following their lead.

The results of Don’s southern visit were plain. A horse whisperer and a rose whisperer met, and another rose whisperer was born. Johnny Becnel had blazed the way through a sea of experts and lately through a ravishing disease of cancer from which he now rests (the rose world mourns Johnny’s untimely loss on May 3, 2004). But Don Gill caught the vision. He saw Johnny’s methods all too unbelievably real in his garden, and now he is a true believer in Johnny Becnel’s ways. Don is now a horse whisperer become rose whisperer—a-la-Becnel.

What are the rose-growing methods that Don Gill now uses with such satisfying returns?

1. Choose your roses. Plant roses that offer the most potential you can find. They don’t have to be Fortuniana rootstock, but for show-quality Hybrid Teas and Miniatures that’s a great plus. But many roses have great potential that are grown from other rootstocks and from their own roots, as well. Listen for those thoroughbreds and seek them for your garden, from whatever likely or unlikely source—rose nurseries, hybridizers, Roses In Review ratings (see ARS 2004 Handbook for Selecting Roses, free with ARS membership), and rose society members.

2. Plant your roses. Put them in the best soil you can provide. This lesson cannot be overstressed.

When Don decided to bring Fortuniana-rooted roses into his garden, he took out all the native soil in his rose bed. “Experts” say *amend* your soil with sand and humus (organic matter). That’s sound advice, but is it the *best* advice? If you want champion winners you treat them like the champions they are. Rather than *improve* their conditions, you give them the best conditions you can. Don did this by replacing all the soil down to two feet with a “raised bed mix” he got from a local soil products dealer (who had also listened to a successful rosarian, **Dr. Louis Mishu**, our NRS president and middle-Tennessee soil analyst in developing this mixture), and he results were instantaneous. His new Fortuniana-rooted roses were delighted.

Don has also now found another, perhaps even higher quality soil mixture called “**Royal Soil**,” from composted horse manure (with small amounts of by-products from Tennessee distillery mash). This early spring he put on another two-inch layer of Royal Soil in all his rose beds. When I interviewed Don in late April (2004) his roses were jumping up from their winter’s nap with pure joy.

Where you plant your roses is important. The roses will all tell you they love the sun. But *what* you plant them *in* is more important. Don gives them the best because only the best is good enough for winners, champions, gorgeous roses, and yes, Queens galore.

3. Space your roses. The commonly accepted book-wisdom says to space your roses on three-foot centers. This is fine for those bushes that are deadheaded and blooms cut during the blooming season according to booklore. That tradition says to deadhead a stem back to the first five-leaflet bud-axel, so that the new stem can grow from that point from a sturdy base on the previous stem. The only problem is that three-foot spacing is then a must, for you thus create larger, more massive (and much higher) bushes, even though newer stems and blooms become smaller with each bloom cycle. The rose's energy from the root system goes mainly into the greater size of branches and foliage rather than the new blooms and stems.

A related problem also arises: Those shorter, thinner stems must usually be straightened by some brace or supporting stick before a rose show, because, growing from the edges of a large bush, they naturally bend upward seeking the sun. "I used to spend a lot of time straightening out my rose stems," Don said. "Now, the way I space and deadhead (summer-prune) my roses, my new stems grow tall and straight from the beginning". But the best part is, Don confessed, is the size of his bushes. "The way I space and cut during the season, they are never taller than my shoulders. I don't want to take a ladder with me every time I cut roses late in the season."

The answer? Don spaces his roses not on three-foot centers as he was told for many years, but now on two-foot centers, following Becnel's methods. The reason can be quickly seen.

4. Prune (and "dead-head") your roses—all during the growing season. Following Becnel, Don summer prunes or cuts (dead-heads) spent blooms *not* from the first five-leaflet axel of the stem, but *much further* down the spent stem, out from just the third leaf-axel (usually the first major bud-eye) from the main or "basal-break" cane. ("Basal-breaks" are major plant shoots growing out of the original bud-union or graft made onto the Fortuniana rootstock). The new bloom stem will now grow from the main bush cane and not from "stem-on-stem, as was being promoted by the older "cut-at-the-first-five-leaflet-axel" legend. The result? Straight up, strong, large-leaf-balanced, healthy stems growing from low on a major cane and framing a large, queen-sized bloom at the top. Early on, any side buds and stem growth were finger-pruned. The full energy of the bush, the main cane, and the new bloom stem have thus been directed to producing a queen-quality rose. "And the beauty of it is," Don said, "Any bush thus pruned during the season can produce a number of Queens, often at the same time."

5. Stake Your Roses. Now Don's pruning efficiency reduces the over-all width and height of the bush, making two-foot spacing very practical, easy to maintain, and able to contain canes grow very long-stemmed roses emanating from one of several main or basal shoots. However, with Fortuniana roots growing very near the surface, although massive in quantity, these main canes may easily be blown over and broken by even moderate winds and summer rainstorms. The original graft or bud-union itself is vulnerable to wind stress, summer and winter, and the whole bush can be lost. For roses grown and pruned in the Fortuniana style, **permanent staking of each plant is a must.**

Don uses four-foot lengths of “iron rebar” (reinforcing rods used in concrete construction, sold by building supply stores), one rebar rod hammered at least two feet into the ground at the base of each rose bush. The main budded or grafted cane is securely (but not too tightly) tied to this strong anchor six to twelve inches (depending on the age and volume of the bush) above the bud-union/graft. The bush is now protected from breaking at its most critical junction. Additional heavy canes and new basal-breaks can be staked with strong, hollow, plastic-coated tubing of varying lengths and thickness, which may be purchased from most garden centers. These are usually lightweight, green in color, and blend well with the canes of the plant. Staking the major canes during their early basal growth is essential, and it gives the cane the additional stamina needed during the season to hold up those long-stemmed roses.

6. Feed your roses—in their royal beds. But remember, one good feeding in the spring (April or early May) after they begin to wake up and are hungry is about enough. Except for an extra tonic or boost before a rose show, a good, well-balanced feeding presentation in the spring will nourish them royally for a season, until they’re ready to slow down again many months later.

What does Don feed his roses? He says, “After I have put on a two-inch layer of Royal Soil, I *broadcast across* my beds *one handful* for *each bush* of *each* of the following ingredients: Alfalfa pellets, Oscomote, fish meal, and milorganite; and several ‘pinches’ of blood meal per bush.” Notice that Don did not say what the rose books say, that he spreads the fertilizer evenly around the drip-line, or the outer perimeter of the bush. “If I did that,” said Don, “I would starve my roses. Fortuniana roots grow all through the beds, sometimes ten or more feet away from the bush. And their thick, hair-like feeding-masses are close to the surface, not deep in the ground.”

Don scratches all these ingredients lightly into the soil, covers the whole bed with pine straw mulch, and lets his automatic watering system (set on timers for each bed) do the rest of the feeding. “After that,” said Don “except for the week before a rose show, I’m done with feeding and watering for the rest of the year. Now I can concentrate on maintaining and enjoying my roses and developing and shaping my Queens”—ah, yes, bringing out the potential of those beautiful champions for all to see.

7. Did I mention water? Don said, “I could spend time watering my roses by hand, and many people do.” It is a relaxing way to spend time looking at each rose bush. But Don believes that his roses fare even better knowing that ample water will come to them at regular times a week. Now that’s not a lot of time. He says, “I don’t over-water by any means—perhaps 10 minutes three times a week, depending on the bed.”

Don said that he is happy with his **Rainbird** programmable watering system. “My round sprinkler heads emit a flat round spray that covers the ground but not the leaves. With every watering, my roses are also regularly fed, as the time-release elements flow into the Fortuniana root systems. The organic foods pack the soil with micro-organisms that are continually making these nutrients available to my roses.”

8. Spray your roses—but don't over spray. And don't spend your major rose care-time spraying or thinking that you should be spraying. Spraying is the biggest “bug-a-boo” of growing roses. “It shouldn't be hard to spray roses well,” said Don Gill.

For insects, Don sprays sparingly, usually only when they become an evident problem, or during the week before a rose show. Otherwise he can tolerate a few critters that usually become fodder for the beneficial insects (like lady bugs and praying mantis'). As needed, however, Don keeps a supply on hand of **Orthene** or **Mavrik**, keeping in mind that these are very toxic (poisonous) chemicals, both to the environment and to himself, if not properly handled with extreme *caution* (or *warning* of their dangerous potential). During the heat of summer, spider mites (almost unseen, appearing on the underside of leaves like sprinkled salt or pepper grains) can defoliate, weaken, and damage the lower portions of a bush. But for Don, when spider mites appear on his bushes, a couple of treatments in early summer with a *miticide* like **Floramite** usually eliminate them for the season.

Preventing fungus diseases requires regular spraying, but for Don, that means about 30-45 minutes once every two weeks for 150 roses. In Middle Tennessee, you probably couldn't get by with any less than that, with our frequent and sustained warm periods of rain or high humidity. Blackspot, of course, is our worst and most prevalent fungus, but we also contend with mildew (which may be white and powdery or purplish and splotchy). Protection from fungus is a must for growing beautiful roses, but it does not have to be a laborious chore. Don uses an efficient two-gallon **Atomist** sprayer (emitting a very fine mist instead of a stream of liquid spray material) for applying **Banner Maxx** (2/3 teaspoon per gallon).

We have all been told by experts to spray pesticide chemicals on rose bushes only in the cooler mornings or late afternoons in order to prevent chemical leaf-burn. Don Gill says “No.” Following his mentor, Johnny Becnel, Don says that the optimal time to spray roses is during mid-day, between 10:00 AM and 2:00 PM. “During this warmest period of the day, chemicals dry much more quickly on the leaves, often within five or ten minutes,” said Don. “Earlier or later, the foliage remains wet for 30 minutes to an hour before drying, depending on humidity and circulation. It's the wet chemical that burns or damages the foliage. The quicker they dry the healthier the foliage.” You don't want to be outside during the heat of mid-day? “Then get an Atomister,” Don says. “It much quicker and a lot more effective way of spraying your garden.”

By early May this year Don had no appearance of blackspot in his rose garden and no evidence of leaf-burn. Should blackspot rear its ugly head, as it has already in most gardens during our many days of spring rain, Don adds **Manzate** (zinc) powder (or **Mancozeb** liquid) to his fungicide spray (1 tablespoon per gallon). He may repeat this zinc treatment weekly or more often for a severe outbreak. For an occasional bush that is prone to mildew during cool, wet periods, Don prefers to use **Erase**. However, with an efficient misting with **Banner Maxx** every two weeks and occasional treatment for insects as needed, Don's rose bushes characteristically display disease and bug-free,

shiny, healthy foliage, even during the height of Japanese Beetle invasions (July to early August).

Now how do Don's roses resist the onslaught of summer beetles? After all, they present a most luscious attraction with their increased size and substance. Don has developed his own self-styled treatment for discouraging Japanese Beetles with *Neem* oil (**Safer Brand**, an organic product). His treatment may not appeal to you. Many people simply sacrifice their best blooms (and foliage) to the beetles during mid-summer, or protect some with a light netting, and then enjoy a resurgence of blooms during late August, September, and October. Summer's heat often reduces the size and quality of their roses, anyway.

Don's roses stay mostly free of Japanese beetle attacks, and here's how: Several days a week in early morning or evening after sunset he drenches all vulnerable yard and garden shrubs with *Neem* oil (at full recommended strength) with his Atomister sprayer. He then lightly mists (at one-half recommended strength) his roses while standing some 15 feet away. (Unlike chemicals, organic oil sprays can and do harm foliage when applied during mid-day heat. Oils do not dry quickly and block the necessary "breathing" action of the leaves, which more critical during mid-day than late evening or early morning.) Apparently the Beetles detest the bitter oil taste and mostly vacate his roses for more delectable feasts elsewhere. For quality roses like Don Gill's, perhaps this mid-summer beetlemania is worth the effort. It's certainly more efficient than twice daily picking off the bugs and drowning them into a bucket of soapy water.

9. Winterize your roses (for temperate and cooler zones). What does that mean? For Don Gill, it does *not* mean cutting your roses back in early December or stripping off their leaves. **"Do not cut back your roses for the winter,"** said Don. First of all, because they are securely staked, their will not be severely damaged by most winds, even strong, cold, winter winds. "Large Fortuniana root systems need lots of foliage and branches to maintain their health through the winter," said Don. But he believes the notion applies to all other roses, in spite of the rose books. Well-supported bushes don't need cutting back. In fact, it diminishes their potential vigor for the next season when they are winter pruned.

Winterizing, however, *does* mean protecting your rose bushes from dehydrating and damaging harsh winds and extreme cold temperature changes. For Don Gill's roses, that means in mid-December applying about 18 inches of fresh Royal Soil or Raised Bed Mix around the base of each rose bush, thus protecting its sensitive bud or graft unions. He keeps this new soil in place around each bush using a tar or felt-paper collar, adjusted to the size of the bush. "Making and filling the felt collars is not hard," said Don. "It takes about a day. I take a roll of felt paper, unroll about a twenty-five foot length on the ground, and take my knife and split the strip down the middle" (each strip is now about 18 inches wide and 25 feet long). Don then approaches each bush in his bed, measures the strip around the bush for size, cuts, and staples the collar in place around the base of the plant. When every bush has thus been "collared," he then comes back around the beds with his wheelbarrow loading and filling each collar with a fresh soil mixture.

Don has not lost a single Fortuniana rootstock rose, either Hybrid Tea or Miniature using his winterizing method. *However, the felt collars only serve about two months.* He removes and disposes of them during the warming days of February. “If I leave them in place too long, until the weather really warms up, then other kinds of damage can occur, like fungus-rot diseases. Late winter and early spring rains begin to remove the soil away from the plant base or even the bud union. But I can always cover them back quickly if an extreme cold wave is forecast,” he said. “Most of my work in taking care of roses happens in during a few days in December and then again in early spring,” said Don. “But it’s more than worth the effort I put in at those times for the rewards I get the rest of the year.”

10. Spring-prune your roses. “Early spring is time when I really cut back my roses to start a new blooming season,” Don said. “In my garden, it’s usually the third or fourth week in March.” Since they have not been cut back at all before winter, most of Don’s roses are beginning to leaf out and grow by spring pruning. However, their great root systems that have continued to live and grow during the winter are well suited for giving vigorous shoots and numerous basal breaks for an even more productive plant renewal for the new season. Strong pruning seems to stimulate them even more. Don cuts them all down to mostly around two to three feet high. But the amazing thing is, having not been cut back for winter, Don’s roses exhibited very little winterkill. Almost all of his spring pruning cuts were showing full, white, growing wood, whether cut high or low.

By mid-spring when I visited with Don in his garden, abundant new main canes were supporting hundreds of long-growing stems and buds. Don said, “My roses look the best that I’ve seen them at this stage. The only trouble is, I’m afraid they’ll all be bloomed out by the middle of May and I won’t have any for the Nashville Rose Show” (late May) Don’t count on it. With all those vigorous new canes and buds, some will surely still be opening by then, with others taking their places.

Don “couldn’t be happier” with his rose growing methods. I couldn’t be happier after visiting with Don in his garden. Many of his “alternative” methods, whether or not intended for Fortuniana rootstock roses, I will be trying in my garden. Some I have tried already. The first thing I did after cutting back my roses using Don’s low-pruning and close-to-the-main-cane methods, I hauled out my Atomister, filled it with a mixture of **Banner Maxx** and **Manzate** (I had plenty of blackspot to eradicate), and would you believe, I finished a job that usually takes two-three tiresome hours in 45 minutes?

Now, if only I can spend the rest of the season cutting and grooming for those Queens. But I still have some uncovering, feeding, and mulching to finish. Oh well, I’m still learning from the rose whisperer—all in good time!