

Favorite Rose Companions

By Leann Barron

When planting roses in the garden, many of us isolate them in their own beds, away from other plants. This tradition is particularly useful for rose exhibitors and those with lots of garden space, but the roses can appear starkly bare, especially when not in bloom. For most of us, we want our roses incorporated into the mixed garden, The Queen of Flowers mingling with the commoners, so to speak.

The great British horticulturist Christopher Lloyd's advice was to combine roses with other perennials when possible. He loved roses, lecturing and writing about them all his life, including making the frightening observation, "I believe that in his choice and arrangements of roses in the garden alone, one can read a man's character." This is interesting, in light of the fact that later in life, he ripped out his mother's beloved rose garden, with some specimens over 70 years old, replacing it with cannas, dahlias and other flamboyant tropicals. Lloyd suggested that a person's true character is revealed through his art. He felt strongly about the ungainly bushes and awkward color mixes. But that is where we part ways. I don't worry too much about awkward color combinations or matchy-matching my roses with the house color or the perennials. I choose roses for various reasons, such as fragrance, repeat performance and disease resistance, plus, I like to have different colors available for cutting. Wonder what that says about "character?"

Here are some considerations to consider before investing in a companion plant for roses. Will it grow in the same garden conditions as roses? Does it prefer moist or dry soil? Can it handle full sun? What is its growth habit, and how close can you place it to other plants? What is its bloom cycle? Would the plant's texture harmonize with the rose?

Here are some of my favorite companion plants for roses:

Perennials, Vines, Herbs and Bulbs

Clematis (my favorite climbing rose companion, clematis are great for intertwining through roses--try white clematis with red roses, or purple clematis with pink, white, red or yellow roses)

Artemisia 'Powis Castle' This silver, lacy-leaved woody perennial is a multi-purpose workhorse in the garden, and its delicate frosty foliage enhances any rose.

Calaminta (Catmint) Resembles baby's breath, available in white and purple, tall and short cultivars, great rose companion. Bees love it, so do cats!

Lavender A perennial favorite with rosarians all over the world.

Salvias Extremely useful and colorful perennial and annual cultivars available, many colors, attracts hummingbirds and bees.

Daylilies (Hemerocallis) Great underplanted with hybrid tea roses, hiding their bare "legs."

Oriental and Asian Lilies (Lilium) Classic rose companion, especially with old garden roses. One of my favorites.

Verbena bonariensis (Brazilian verbena, Verbena on a stick) an airy, tall plant, with small purple blooms that are great accents for shrub roses. Non-invasive perennial in our area. Lovely.

Dahlias So many dahlias, so little time! I'm fond of the lanky red 'Bishop of Llandaff' with its chocolate foliage. The slender stems, laden with single-petaled blooms, fall over in the summer and lace through roses--particularly great with white and yellow roses. Perennial for me.

Boxwood One of the most popular, classically attractive rose companions.

Lespedeza (Bush clover) a cascading, late summer purple-blooming shrub that I love with my few hybrid teas.

Other perennial favorites with roses:

Hydrangea, spiraea, flowering dogwood, evergreen trees (great muted backdrop for roses), phlox, buddleia (butterfly bush), bronze fennel (butterfly host plant), asclepias, colocasia, canna (especially bronze leaf

cultivars such as 'Australia') rosemary, loropetalum, allium, late-blooming narcissus poeticus, Persicaria 'Red Dragon', Tanacetum 'Isla Gold.'

Annuals

Angelonia One of the best all-around annuals. Its perfect low-growing, non-stop summer blooms complement any rose. It can be planted near roses, and since it only grows 18-24", can be used with container roses. Comes in variety of colors. Highly recommended.

Euphorbia 'Diamond Frost' This baby's breath look-alike is one of the best new annuals to hit the market. It has already won many top awards and thrives in the toughest garden situations. Its versatility is unsurpassed, I consider it a "must-have." Destined to be a classic.

Torenia Resembling violas, these are great underplantings for roses. New varieties are heat-tolerant and add a happy splash of color at roses' feet.

Other classic annuals with roses:

Dark leaved basil, petunias, sweet potato vine, sun coleus, pentas, impatiens, moonflower vine. Get out there and introduce your lonely roses to some new friends today. You'll be surprised at how well they get along.