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The Allure of Species Roses

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# The Allure of Species Roses

A species rose (abbreviated spp.) is a wild rose. They hail from diverse climates and geographic centers of the northern hemisphere (North America, Europe into North Central Asia, the Mid East, with a high percentage occurring throughout China). More often than not, they are classified and listed by genus (*Rosa*) and species with no varietal or cultivar name, although they often have a common name:

*Rosa eglanteria* – Sweet Briar rose

*Rosa banksia* – the Banksia rose

*Rosa foetida* – Austrian Copper

*Rosa rugosa* – the Rugosas

Conversely, with cultivated, bred garden roses, the genus and species are assumed (if known) and are classed by type, class (a non-botanical term), and variety or cultivar:

Grandiflora – ‘Gold Medal’

Hybrid Tea – ‘Dainty Bess’

## CHARACTERISTICS OF SPECIES ROSES

- Simple flower form, 5–10 petals
- Often borne as a single, terminal bloom
- Rarely (if ever) repeat blooming
- Early season bloomers (for example, Banksia blooms in March in Santa Cruz)
- Abundant bloom
- Restricted bloom period (3–6 weeks)
- Double dividend of blooms and then attractive, in some cases edible and choice, hips
- (swollen ovaries)
- Limited color range: mostly shades of soft or shell pink, rarely pure white, crimson or yellow,
- some reds or scarlets
- Require little or no garden care (fertility, sprays, deadheading, pruning) and only moderate water (1–2x/month)

As pre-eminent rose breeder David Austin writes in his book *Shrub Roses and Climbing Roses*, “The pleasure of wild roses lies not so much in their colourfulness

or the showiness of their flowers, but more in their simplicity, as well as in the elegance of their growth, the daintiness of their foliage, and their often richly colored fruit. Indeed, hardly any of the wild roses are lacking in beauty, but it is a beauty that has to be looked for.”

’Nough said. Find a way to bring a few species roses into the garden and both time (history) and terrain (geography) will beckon to you and lure you back out beyond the garden gate.



## RUGOSA SPP. AND RUGOSA HYBRIDS

Most *Rugosa* spp. roses hail from northeastern Asia—northern Japan, Korea, China and north to Siberia. They are among the most cold hardy of all native or garden roses (-40° to 50° F). They are ridiculously tolerant of a wide range of soil types, especially sandy soils. In fact, they are referred to as “sand dune” roses. I have a strong visual memory, from my youth, of Rugosas growing and thriving on the sand dunes of Cape Cod, coastal Maine and New Hampshire.

As species roses, by definition, Rugosas breed true to type from seeds if pollinated by themselves or other varieties within the species. That is oh so not true about garden roses, which generally have more complex parentage genetics and often several different species in their background. *Rugosa* hybrids offer a wider range of flower colors than the species, along with more of a tendency to repeat bloom and greater petalage (>10). They are the result of breeding programs crossing a *Rugosa* rose with various garden roses. As per looks and performance, they are virtually as carefree and wild as the species.

Rugosas are reliably consistent performers and yet they remain among the most under-appreciated and unsung members of the rose family. Roses that strongly

repeat bloom, have long, strong cutting stems, and flowers with a vase life of more than 5–7 days are often preferred as more useful by gardeners, especially in small gardens. But that is not the *Rugosa* rose.

Rugosas, typical of most shrub (as opposed to modern bush) roses, have more of an abiding presence, character and grace in the garden. When they bloom, both the number of blooms coupled with their elegantly simple, single (5 petaled), 4"–6" across, undulating petals make a compelling statement. But in truth they are only intermittent in their proclivity to rebloom. The stems possess many fine prickles that are impossible to remove and thus reduce vase life. The books talk endlessly—in a positive vein—about the scent of Rugosas, calling them "well scented." Keep in mind most of the books are written by the Brits. I find this to be a euphemism for lightly or even weakly scented. Scent is variable variety to variety. But when it's good, it's intoxicating.

## FEATURES OF RUGOSA ROSES

*Bush Characteristics:* *Rugosa* bushes are tall (3–7 feet), very erect but not stiff, and usually have gracefully arching canes (rose jargon for branches). The bushes are thick and full with the ability to self-propagate and spread gently via underground rhizomes. The canes feature many prickles that are small and bothersome, but not large and menacing like many wild species roses. The evolutionary purpose of these prickles is to repel unwanted predators from the succulent seed-bearing hips (swollen ovaries).

*Foliage:* *Rugosa* leaves tend toward dark greens and serve as a sedate, contrasting backdrop to the flower. The foliage undulates and has a very waxy cuticle (surface). The botanical term for the foliage is *rugose*, derived from the Latin word *ruġa*, which essentially translates as having a wrinkled, crinkled and wavy leaf surface.

*Rugosa* foliage is a strong feature of the plant. The waxy cuticle also prevents fungal diseases from gaining a foothold and proliferating, which is a serious problem on most garden roses, modern or heirloom. Much like kelp products are an organic gardener's insurance policy against trace nutrient deficiencies, Rugosas are an organic gardener's hedge against fungal diseases. They are not just disease resistant but virtually disease immune. That is to say they never need spraying (not low, but no-spray roses.) As an added bonus, *Rugosa's* foliage goes all autumnal in the fall, with shades of yellow, orange and bronze-y red.

*Hips:* Another *Rugosa* dividend is the hips (fruits, or swollen ovaries). They tend to large (1–2"), colorful (orange-red), succulent and delicious. During the growing season, they develop alongside canes with continuing summer-fall blooms. At maturation in the fall they can be dried and used as a sweet-tart, high vitamin C tea, made into jam or be left to ferment "on the vine" and offered as an adult beverage / food source to birds along with two other berry-producing members of the Rose family (Cotoneaster and Pyracantha). Birds will actually get drunk from fermented rose hips.

*Flowers:* Most Rugosas feature striking simple single flowers 3–6" wide. The petals are tough but give the appearance of being delicate, even fragile. Stamens are prominent, many and protruding, often cream or soft yellow to bold golden. Scent can be variable; from none to sweet-tart to overwhelming (in a good way). Most Rugosas feature a strong early spring flush of blooms and then little or only intermittent flowering, but some bloom almost continuously or at least offer a strong repeat bloom. Some Rugosas have semi- or fully-double flower forms.

## Greatest Hits of Rugosas

*Rosa rugosa* var. *alba*: Tall—up to 6'—with large (up to 6" across) pure white, single (5 petals) flowers with strong fragrance. The bloom period extends intermittently through fall after a strong push in spring. Hips are large, red, abundant and tasty. Very prickly (lots and little).

*Rosa rugosa* var. *rubra*: Tall—up to 6'. As Alba, but with a graceful arch to the canes and brilliant magenta-purple flowers. Blooms in clusters and sets hips similarly.

## Rugosa Hybrids

*Scabrosa*: This *Rugosa* is a knockout, growing 4–7' tall with large (5") single flowers whose color has been described variously as: purple-pink, velvet crimson shading to violet-mauve, mauve-red, rosy magenta and the outrageous violaceous-crimson. Flower color is stronger as it opens, softening at full bloom. As big on lustrous, shiny foliage as it is on tasty, fleshy hips the size of cherry tomatoes. Strong, intense fragrance and just about continuously in bloom April–October.

*Blanc Double de Coubert*: At 3–4' in height, this is one of the more compact Rugosas, bearing white semi-double blooms that are delicate snow white and strongly fragrant. A little sparse in both foliage and hips.

**Roseaie de L'Hay** (named after famous Parisian rose garden): Grows 6–7' in height and bears large, rich crimson flowers with a sweet scent. The flowers are fully double and flop in on themselves and alas, there are no hips. Repeat blooming. The overall effect of the dense, luxuriant foliage and audacious flowers (number, shape, color and scent) make this a stunning must-have.

**Agnes:** A rare yellow *Rugosa* that grows 3–6' in height. Flowers are globular, double (3") and of a "pale harvest moon yellow." Dark green foliage serves as a good foil to the flowers. Sweet, tangy fragrance. Alan Chadwick had one planted just at the entrance to the garden chalet that lamentably gave up the ghost in the wet El Niño of '98. A hard plant to source—the good news being that Roses of Yesterday and Today (see below) had one remaining container of 'Agnes' that now graces the same planting spot in front of the chalet. It is situated in a bed along with 'Roseaie de L'Hay', 'Blanc Double de Coubert', 'Alba', and 'Scabrosa'. They'll achieve bloom size in spring 2011, along with a burgeoning collection of five to six more *Rugosas*, which were established thanks to a grant from the Stanley Smith Horticultural Foundation.

**Ann Endt:** A slow-growing, 3-4' tall shrub. Dense foliage, attractive in the landscape. Rich velour-like deep purple single flowers with striking golden stamens. A show stopper!

**Frau Dagmar Hartopp**, a.k.a. **Frau Dagmar Hastrup:** Grows 4–5' tall and bears flowers that feature wide petals of a delicate pink with showy soft yellow stamens. Arguably the most beautiful of all *Rugosas*. Blooms June–September, followed by large (3"), succulent red hips.

### GOOD SOURCES OF RUGOSA ROSES

**Raintree Nursery** offers 7 varieties (bareroot): [www.raintreenursery.com](http://www.raintreenursery.com), 800.391-8892; located in Morton, WA

**Roses of Yesterday and Today** carries a smattering of varieties: [www.rosesofyesterday.com](http://www.rosesofyesterday.com), 831.728-1901, located in Corralitos, CA. This family business has a beautiful garden that is open daily to the public.

**Heirloom Roses** – offers 9 quality varieties from "own root" cuttings, live plants during growing season (plants are small): [www.heirloomroses.com](http://www.heirloomroses.com), 503.538-1576; located in St. Paul, OR

**Antique Rose Emporium** – bareroot and actively growing plants in season: [www.antiqueroseemporium.com](http://www.antiqueroseemporium.com), 800.441-0002; located in Brenham, TX

**Vintage Gardens** – heirloom specialists: [www.vintagegardens.com](http://www.vintagegardens.com), 707.829-2035; located in Sebastopol, CA

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