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February is the month gardeners start thinking about roses. I thought you'd all like to learn about Bette Angell one of our county's treasured rose growers. Bette was happy to share her secrets of success with me and with you.

Rose Farm, the home and gardens of Bette and Howard Angell located on East Day Road on Bainbridge Island, was featured on the 1989 and 1999 Bainbridge in Bloom Tours. Even in the dead of winter I could see why. Built twenty-four years ago by Howard and Bette the home and land are surrounded by a white wooden picket fence with catenary (suspended chain shaped) curves. People knock on their door to ask about the fence. Howard is an engineer and designed it. It's the perfect backdrop for all the eye-pleasing plants. Several arbors and gates in the fence are festooned with climbing roses.

The Angells are retiring to a condo on Bainbridge and their house is up for sale. I envy the lucky gardener who will inherit all the splendor and soul satisfying luxury of Bette's and Howard's labors. Like all gardeners though Bette is already planning and planting her new smaller garden. Howard designed a similar fence for the new garden. She's calling their new home "Rose Cottage" and has been tilling up and enriching the soil and already moved and planted Just Joey, Savoy Hotel, Elina, Gold Medal, Honor, Apricot Nectar and, last but not least, two Joseph's Coat to grow up the side of the house. I'm sure the garden will delight the new neighbors.

I asked Bette to name her favorite rose or roses and to estimate how many roses she had. "My favorite is the one I'm looking at," she replied, adding, "between one hundred and insanity. I don't count them because I'd give up." Bette said she's glad Howard is so supportive of her horticultural habit and admits to being a "horticultural glutton." Angell's in good company, gardening is the best addiction I can think of and I know many gardeners who'd agree.

Bette's secret to growing roses is to prepare the rose bed before planting. Rototill or dig the soil up really well. Mix in top soil, alfalfa pellets, lime, bone meal and lots of organic material. Bette likes TAGRO which is sludge from a sewage treatment plant in Tacoma. You drive over and load it up in your truck she says. She also recommends Emu topsoil which she's using in her new garden. Smith's Dairy manure is also excellent she adds.

She keeps a rose notebook containing notes on her plantings and purchases and consults the Rose Society grading system when selecting roses. The system rates roses from 1-10 (for hardiness and disease resistance). Bette tries to pick roses that are rated 7 and above, but sometimes absolutely has to have a rose and doesn't care how it's rated. "I keep trying Angel Face but lose more to the weather than I can count, but it's gorgeous and fragrant. I've reached the point in life where the roses either make it or they don't," said Bette.

When asked for more information about rose cultivation Bette told me "If you do everything the books tell you it's so much work you'd never do it. Enjoy your garden." A high fence to keep deer out surrounds her biggest rose area. Bette stresses that roses need as much sun as you can give them. Keep the area under the roses clean, pick up dead leaves and petals. Prune to allow air circulation and sun absorption. Bette admits trying all the advice she's read and takes and chooses what works best for her situation. She carries a small spray bottle with her to control aphids (but rarely needs it and then only treats that bud or branch). Bette waters early in the morning and spends hours deadheading, cleaning and pruning. Angell admits to sometimes using a fungicide but follows the directions carefully and sprays when bees aren't active.

Customers of Bainbridge Gardens will remember Bette from her twenty years there. She started out in the plant section but owner Junco soon had her creating floral arrangements. We poured over two photo albums showing her gardens and floral designs. My favorite design (gorgeous and striking) showed a tall vase with one huge Hosta leaf, a tall white Calla Lily and a spiraled Curly Willow branch. Another photo showed huge deep blue Hydrangeas growing in the garden as a backdrop for red/gold Day Lilies with red nasturtiums tucked around their feet. Bette said some plantings happen by chance and are often the most enjoyable.

Also in the albums were photos of Bette's and Howard's children and grandchildren. She told me she has five grandkids with one on the way. I noticed wedding bouquets and a man surrounded by tomato plants. Bette said she made the bouquets and arrangements for her two daughters' weddings. The tomato guru was son, Tom Angell, whose passion is growing peppers and tomatoes. (Hmmm sounds like another story to me.)

Bette invited me back in the spring and summer to see her garden in full bloom. I'm counting the days. Thank you Bette for sharing your gardening joy and expertise with us. You truly are a gardening angel.