

Since tomorrow is Valentine's Day I thought a column on roses would be quite appropriate. If you haven't gotten a present for your Valentine a rose might be just the ticket. Think of it as a gift that will keep on giving for many years to come.

I consulted with Eric Hunter the President of Kitsap County Rose Society. He said we can all phone him any time to talk about roses. His number is 377-9917. The Rose Society meets the third Monday of each month at 7 p.m. at Country Meadows on Silverdale Way.

Eric said his favorite rose is "the one I'm holding in my hand." Six easy care roses are: floribundas Ice Berg (white), Sun Sprite (golden yellow) or Europeana (red) and hybrid teas Garden Party (white), Gold Medal (yellow) and Mr. Lincoln (red). Three great perfumed roses are: Double Delight, Perfume Delight and Stainless Steel. All these roses are relatively disease free.

This is the perfect time to plant roses and Eric says bare root roses are more economical. If you wait until summer to purchase the container roses you're paying for the bare-root roses but they've now been potted up and therefore will cost you more money.

The cost of the rose doesn't necessarily determine the value. But you do want to purchase number one grade roses. These roses will have three stems, all at least one-half to one-inch thick and eighteen inches long. "You're taking a chance with grade two roses. For the difference in price you should go with grade one," he says.

Some roses come in boxes and the package will say plant it box and all. Hunter recommends removing the box and packaging. Treat it like a bare root rose. Some roses have wax-coated stems. This coating keeps the rose from dehydrating during shipping. The coating wears away with time. You could, if you really needed to, peel off the wax after planting but it's not necessary.

I asked about soil amendments. Eric's philosophy is feed the plant and it's environment. He composts his banana peels and adds shredded newspaper for carbon and says compost is a wonderful mulch for roses. Some people add a banana peel and shredded banana peel directly into their planting hole. "You can mix bonemeal (or super phosphate), alfalfa pellets and a small handful of 10-10-10 fertilizer in with the native soil from the planting hole," he added. Make sure the soil and amendments are mixed well so you don't burn the roots. Roses also are also thirsty plants. They like lots of water but don't like wet feet. Water them once a week in hot weather he says.

I asked about pruning roses. "Pruning is like a haircut. The difference between a bad haircut and a good one is 30 days," Hunter said. In fact, when planting new roses it's best not to prune the first year because you want the rose to spend time getting settled in and growing roots. If you prune it the plant will spend energy trying to grow and build roots.

Last but not least if Eric had a lot of land he'd like to collect all the old roses. Old roses flower once a year and are sprawlers by nature. Instead try David Austin roses for the smell and beauty of old roses with a more compact growing habit. A few of Hunter's favorite Austins are: Gertrude Jekyll, Wife of Bath, Glamis Castle, Wise Portia and Tradescant (a dark red). Hunter says David Austin borrowed from Shakespeare in naming many of his roses.

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