

## IN THE GARDEN

### **March in the Rose Garden**, by Royal Krieger

March is when the Bay Area starts to see the early growth patterns of our roses. If my pruning has been directed well, the roses should be developing as desired. However, as much as I'd like to be in control, location, sun and the rose's natural growth pattern will have a say. If you still have some pruning to do, not to worry, you can still do it.

With the sunny days, our Bay Area roses should be pushing out an abundance of new growth. This is the time to "finger prune." Generally, I want to keep the centers of the rose plant fairly open for good air circulation which helps minimize disease. If I see the start of growth heading for the plant's center I "finger prune" it away. The shoot is young and tender, generally easy to remove by taking my finger and pushing the new growth off to the side. It should break cleanly from the cane. If it's a little too big to finger prune, I snip with a shears.



Once the plants start to leaf out, I do my first fertilizer feeding. I make sure that the weeds are removed from the base and that I have a berm around the drip line of the base to contain my fertilizer and watering of the plant, not the surrounding area where the weeds are hoping to get the fertilizer scraps.

Roses love alfalfa in tea or pellet form, but don't overdo it. Depending on plant size, half to a full cup per rose of pellets is plenty once a year although some like a little "second helping" in early summer. The tea form is just mixing and dissolving the alfalfa pellets in water until dissolved into a "tea." I find making a tea a bit of a hassle (and smelly). However, putting the tea at the rose base looks a lot better than the pellets. Although, in time, the pellets will dissolve and do the same nutrient job. NOTE: Occasionally I read that people spray the alfalfa tea on their roses thinking the rose leaves will absorb the tea. Nope! The rose leaf has a protective coating and won't allow fertilizer absorption through the "cuticle."

An easy rule for when to do the first fertilizing after the winter pruning is when the first shoot's leaves have fully opened or formed. Although many think organic fertilizers are best, probably because they believe organic is better ecologically than chemical, sorry, but that's a myth. N (nitrogen), P (phosphoric acid) and K (soluble potash) is the same stuff...or is it? It is from an ecological standpoint. But, for the rose, generally a chemical fertilizer for the first feeding is preferred. The reason is that the soil is generally too cold for soil micro-organisms to extract nutrients from the mulches or manures used, then the nutrients must be dissolved by the winter rains (or your irrigation system) and the moisture in the soil, and then the rose roots can absorb the nutrients. Inorganic is a food form that dissolves into a watery solution that roses can best absorb in such conditions. Later, when the weather and ground are warmer, "organic" fertilizer is the preferred choice. Generally, chemical (inorganic) is absorbed faster and organic absorbed slower by roses.

So, what chemical fertilizer do I use for the first feeding? I use one where nitrogen (N) is dominant, (the highest number of the three), such as a 12-8-4.

I sometimes get questions regarding trace minerals for the roses. Most of the trace minerals roses need are found in our municipal water. So, if you're watering, you're most likely taking care of

the trace mineral needs of your roses. If not convinced, most commercial fertilizers contain many trace minerals.

One final item and that's watering. Healthy roses must have continual adequate water. I probe the soil to be sure the roses have adequate moisture content. It's not unusual that part of my rose garden is fine, but other areas, even after a rain, will need some watering. If your finger can feel moisture, the roses will prosper.