

ASK A MASTER GARDENER

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Joyce McArthur

Carroll County Master Gardener Volunteer, Georgia Master Gardener Association VP of Education

Growing Roses in Georgia Clay Soils

Q. Which rose varieties grow well in Georgia, specifically in clay soil? Carson B.

A. You want to know if you can grow roses in clay soil? The short answer is no, you can't grow roses in clay soil. The longer answer is yes, with amendments and good growing conditions; you can grow roses in somewhat clay soil.

Before getting to the fun part of choosing which rose species and varieties to grow, let's get the growing conditions out of the way.

Number one and most important is that every single rose, whether bush or climber likes lots of sun. "Lots of sun" means at least 6 hours a day of full sun shining directly on the plant.

Secondly, whether you are planting roses in a bed or a border, they need good air circulation. How do you give a plant good air circulation? You space the rose bushes about four or five feet from one another, and from any fences, houses, walls or other plants. This gives the leaves room to dry out from rain, watering or morning dew. Damp leaves are a breeding ground for disease and fungus.

Lastly, and believe me, just as important, is the composition and condition of the soil in your rose bed. If you've got clay, you're going to need to amend the soil to allow air circulation there, too. Our clay is plenty fertile (just look around you when you're driving down any country road in Georgia. It's lush and green!) The problem with clay is that it is so dense that the water won't drain, and there are few air pockets where the roots grow. Digging in humus like compost, shredded bark or leaves, composted pine bark, even bagged "soil amendment" will lighten up the texture of the clay to let water drain away and air to reach the roots. If you're preparing an entire bed for new roses and other perennials and shrubs, simply add a layer of humus about three or four inches deep, and mix it in to the top 12" of soil with your spading fork or shovel.

Do a soil test in the fall to determine whether you'll need to adjust the pH (acidity or alkalinity) of the soil of your new rose bed. Follow the recommendations from UGA on the amount of lime to add to the soil, if needed.

When it's time to plant your rose bushes in the amended bed, just dig your hole in the prepared soil, making the hole about three times wider than the container the rose plant came in. If you're planting a bare root rose, make the hole at least 24" to 30" wide. Press a firm cone of soil in the center of the hole and set the plant in with the roots spread out around the cone. Shovel the amended soil back in and gently firm the soil with your foot around the plant. You want the soil to be in good contact with the roots, but not compacted.

Planting a single rose takes less preparation, but the conditions are equally as important. Full sun and air circulation are still critical to the growth and health of the plant. Dig your hole about three times wider than the container the plant came in. Don't make it any deeper than the container, though, because you're going to plant the rose *above* the ground level. Mix the clay soil that you've removed from the hole with half again as much compost or other soil amendment (do this on a tarp or in a wheelbarrow).

Shovel some of the amended soil back into the hole, and place the rose so that the crown or graft union (the knobby part where the trunk meets the roots) is about an inch or two above the native soil level. Shovel the rest of the soil in, keeping the crown above the soil level, and firming gently with your foot. Water in well, and keep the rose watered weekly throughout the first growing season or two (if there's not enough rain).

Now, for the fun part! What roses do well in Georgia? That's another of those multi-part answers. Roses in a perfect situation are long lived and hardy plants. Carroll County Master Gardener, Cherrie Glover, is an expert on rose culture and care. Cherrie has been the grower and caregiver of the show stopping rose bed at the Master Gardener's Buffalo Creek Garden near the Carroll County Ag Center for over five years.

Cherrie says about her tried and true roses, "So far, for 12 years, my Midas Touch, Pink Bonica, Dick Clark, Cotton Candy and Betty Boop do better than the others. With our humidity one has to be very consistent with fungicide. All of mine do ok, the ones I mentioned do so much better."

Our situation here in West Georgia is not perfect for roses, by any means, but there are some species and hybrids that UGA's Trial Gardens recommend for our area. For more choices, take a look at UGA's pamphlet "Rose Culture for Georgia"
http://www.caes.uga.edu/extension/thomas/anr/documents/RoseCultureforGA_B671.pdf

Hybrid Teas – the plants are scrappy and rangy, but their blooms in color and fragrance can be breathtaking. Here are a few that UGA has had success with: Peace, Chicago Peace (my personal favorite!), Tropicana, Alabama, and Mister Lincoln.

Floribunda – Angel Face, First Edition, Rose Parade, Apricot Nectar, Gene Boerner, and Saratoga.

Climbers – America, Dr. Van Fleet, Peace, Crimson Glory, Gladiator, and Queen Elizabeth.

Shrub Roses – Meidiland Series, Carefree Wonder, Knock Out

No article on roses would be complete without a shout-out to the great Southern success story, the Knock Out hybrids. On the market for about ten years now, the Knock Outs are the ubiquitous red shrub roses that light up subdivisions all over the South. To date, they've been relatively disease free, hardy, drought proof – the easiest rose I've ever grown.

So, can you grow roses well in clay soil in Georgia? Yes, you can – if you purchase species and varieties that are recommended for our area, and if you prepare the proper planting site for good health and growth.

For more information on rose culture and suggestions, ask at the Master Gardener office at the UGA Extension Carroll County office located at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton or call (770)836-8546.