

## Is Your Soil Verklemp?!

by Audrey McMurray

Here's the most common question I'm asked by gardeners who regularly treat their roses with synthetic fertilizer bought at the big-box stores: "I've been doing this for years and my garden has been great! My roses were never without blooms! So why is everything suddenly dying now?" A couple reasons immediately come to mind:

### 1. The garden is verklemp - all choked up.

Those synthetic fertilizers, and specifically the phosphates in them, do force the roses to bloom, it's true. All living things must have phosphate to thrive, but there is an equilibrium in natural soil that is upset when we regularly add more phosphate to it. The minerals that the plants also need to thrive bind to these phosphates, rendering some of them incapable of being used by the plant. Your soil becomes verklemp, all bound up. But there is an even more pressing issue...

### 2. The garden is sterile.

If there is one thing I've learned from having sat in on so many TRR lectures, it's that plant health is dependent on soil health, and soil health is dependent on a teeming micro population of the "good" molds, viruses, and bacteria. The problem with a continuous application of synthetic fertilizers is that they not only contain phosphates but other mineral salts as well, which build up and kill the beneficial soil microbes.

Your motive was good in that you wanted to help the roses bloom, but let me suggest a fix, and then an alternative to maintaining a healthy rose bed.

First, stop using the synthetic fertilizer and give the roses a break. You need to work on your soil, so let the bushes have one season off. In fact, have a rethink on forcing blooms, in general. All roses will bloom in the spring and, if they are repeat bloomers, they'll bloom whenever they feel that reproductive urge. It takes a lot out of a plant to reproduce so why stress it by forcing it to bloom without a rest? When your soil is healthy and the roses receive adequate water and light, the bushes are going to bloom.

Second, put nutrients back into the soil now, while you are waiting for those bound ones to slowly break down again. Here is a wonderful "tea" based on the witch's brew Ursula White, a veteran Rustler, published years ago in the Old Texas Rose. Apply this every spring and fall and your plants will LOVE you.

In a 13 gallon garbage can put:

- 4 chimpanzees of Medina, any variety (Start pouring and say "One-chimpanzee, two-chimpanzee, three-chimpanzee...")
  - 4 cups of manure/humus mix
  - 1 chimpanzee of SuperThrive
  - 2 cups of alfalfa, pellets or meal - it doesn't matter
  - 2 chimpanzees of fish emulsion, liquid, if you can find it
- Fill with water (rainwater, if you have it) to the top of the garbage can.

Put a small coffee can's worth at each bush's drip line, which is where most of the branches end, right away, keeping the solution well mixed. (I used to let it sit in the garbage can for a few days to stew but later learned that I was making Witch's moonshine so I stopped.) Water in well.

Third, give the rose beds a topping of composted native mulch to reintroduce good bacteria and fungi. Nature's Way Resources sells all different types and can help you pick good products. Tell them the state of your bed and let them advise you. This will cost a bit more but consider it medicine for a sick bed.

In the future, treat your roses to a natural fertilizer which will contain all of the minerals your old big-box fertilizers had, but in more bio-friendly forms and concentrations. I fertilize with SW Fertilizer's Earth Essentials after the spring and fall prunings and, at different times, have used many of Nature's Way Resources products.

Educate yourself on which products promote good soil health. When I stopped using products that that contained insecticides, fungicides, miticides, herbicides, or anything-cides, my need for them slowly went away. There are natural products on the market that do help control diseases but once your soil is healthy, you will find that you don't need to do much spraying anymore. As both Mike Shoup, owner of the Antique Rose Emporium and John Ferguson of Nature's Way Resources remind us: spraying only leads to the need for more spraying.

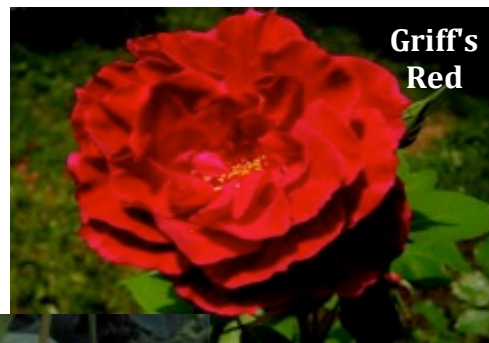


Death, taxes, and blackspot...I'll close with the wise words of Robbi Daves Will, also from the ARE, regarding this ever-present fungus: "Blackspot in the fall is usually an opportunist hitchhiking on a dying leaf surface. It doesn't effect the health of the plant at this time of the year. Blackspot in the late winter is also usually an opportunist fungus attacking old leaves getting ready to drop. It is not something I worry about on antique roses. They have survived this long, what's a little ol' seasonal transition? Last season's leaves are old wardrobe getting ready to be shed. The only time I am concerned about blackspot is if the new growth appears to be unhealthy. Personally, I don't remove the debris, just add more compost so the good guys can gobble up the bad guys."

If you have a rose that constantly battles blackspot, even after your soil has regained its health, then you have another issue to deal with. The rose may not be suited to your clime or needs more air circulation. It may be weak and prone to fungal infections. Pull that puppy out! There are plenty of hardy roses and companion plants to choose from and now that your soil is healthy, you can pick a good one.



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of  
Goshen**



**Griff's  
Red**



**Antoine  
Rivoire**