

Reading Between the Lines

We have tried to make our descriptions of roses helpful and as consistent as possible. As well as stating the rose's classification our ideal is to say something helpful about its colour, fragrance, flowering period, foliage, growth habit & dimensions. Frequently we also mention tolerance of shade & poorer soil conditions.

Colour

Descriptions of colour are at best only a guide, and a subjective one at that. It is fairly obvious that roses come in an almost infinite range of colours and blends. So rather than call dozens of different roses simply "red", breeders & growers try to differentiate with things like "fiery pillarbox red" and "deep blood red" which are evocative, but can be as misleading as they are helpful (I'm still trying to work out the difference between "crimson-scarlet" & "scarlet-crimson".) And if descriptions are less than perfect, on no account be tempted to put too much faith in pictures. They can be really misleading!

The reality is that any given rose variety will vary in shade & intensity - sometimes quite dramatically - depending on the type of soil, the amount of sunshine, the time of year, the age of the individual flower, or even the time of day. I'm afraid that any attempt to order the colours of "the outside room" to match your lounge curtains is doomed to failure.

Fragrance

If colours are subjective and difficult to define things get very much worse when we get to fragrance. What customers don't realise - naturally enough as we've only got our own nose to follow - is that the sense of smell is very individual. It's not that some people have a "good" sense of smell while others don't; rather certain scents seem very powerful to me and other fragrances are almost imperceptible, whilst with you it's the reverse.

So any description of fragrance in roses has by necessity to be based on a sort of "average" perception. And all the variables that affect colour in a rose also affect the intensity of its fragrance. So don't be surprised if you don't agree with the description; we're not trying to pull a fast one - honest!

Flowering Period

Here at last we are on slightly more objective ground, although the constraints of space inevitably require some simplification.

We now use just two terms to cover the whole range of flowering periods.

Once flowering means that there is basically only one flowering season. Most commonly this is for about 3 to 5 weeks during June & July, but for some varieties is earlier or later, or more extensive. And it doesn't rule out some sporadic repeat flowering later in the season.

Repeat flowering means that at the very least there is one subsequent flush of flowers, although this is frequently not as prolific as the initial one. But all Bush, Patio & English Roses, most of the Shrub Roses and many of the Climbers continue to repeat flower right through the Summer and well into the Autumn. Indeed you are very likely to be able to have a small rose posy on the table to accompany your Christmas dinner!

Foliage

Rose leaves are almost as varied in size, shape, texture & colour as the flowers themselves and make a huge contribution to the attractiveness of the plant as a whole. Although we tend to think of the rose

season as not starting until late May or early June, we find the preceding couple of months to be a fascinating time on the nursery as the foliage develops and the rose area is gradually transformed from a sea of white labels waving over black pots to a carpet of every kind of green and purple, bronze and red. Consequently, the prosaic terms we use such as “semi-glossy” and “mid-green” are always going to be inadequate, but hopefully still serve as a guide.

Growth Habit & Dimensions

Once again space requires the enormous range of size and habit to be limited to a few generalisations such as “spreading”, “upright” or “bushy” but at least they are readily understandable and unlikely to be misleading. Not so with dimensions. The problem is that the height and spread of a rose is the most variable characteristic of all with huge variations either side of whatever might be considered the norm for any particular variety.

For this reason I am seriously tempted not to include dimensions at all in our descriptions, particularly when I hear customers rejecting one variety because it says “4’ high” when they wanted one to reach the windowsill which happens to be 4’ 3”. Well, I exaggerate of course, but the fact that dimensions are always given in round figures should alert you to the fact that they are not to be taken as too exact! Sometimes we do revert to saying simply “tall” or “medium”, but this doesn’t really seem very satisfactory either. Finally we apologise to our continental customers and those under the age of twenty for using feet & inches rather than centimetres. (1’ = 30cms; 6” = 15cms.)

Tolerance to Poorer & Shadier Sites

Do not be fooled into thinking that tolerant is the same as happy! Roses are greedy feeders and almost without exception are going to do best in full sun. You may not be able to do anything about the level of shade, but you almost certainly can do something about improving poorer soils - and you should! The results will be well worth it.

Disease Resistance

Not surprisingly this is probably the characteristic that customers are most concerned about. Indeed the most asked question (other than ‘Where’s the coffee shop?) is probably “Is it disease resistant?” Unfortunately this is not as straightforward as it sounds. Undeniably there are some varieties which are prone to disease - the rambler ‘Dorothy Perkins’ for example is a famous martyr to mildew. Equally there are some roses, although not many - and fewer it must be said than the number claimed by breeders and growers! - which remain impervious to disease in all circumstances. The vast majority of roses are somewhere in the middle and how they perform in your garden is as much down to how you grow them as to their innate disease resistance. In other words a “suspect” variety which is well grown with sufficient nutrients, adequate moisture, plenty of sun and air, and which has been regularly and appropriately pruned is going to be a lot healthier than a variety with “excellent disease resistance” which is struggling and under frequent stress.

In this respect roses aren’t so different to humans. If you had to spend a fortnight in a dark and stuffy room with nothing to eat and not enough to drink with a VAT return you couldn’t reconcile, you’d probably be a little peaky too.

For this reason and to avoid misplaced confidence in inadequate cultivation we no longer include any reference to disease resistance on individual plant labels.