

ROSES AND THE COMPANY THEY KEEP

By Jim Grilliot

Includes excerpts from "52 Weeks In The California Garden" by R. Smaus and ARS Article, "Roses Love Company" by L. Biesiadecki

We think of roses as the royalty of the garden. True enough, over centuries of cultivation, they've earned a singular position in the landscape. Roses are strong enough to stand alone in the garden. But, because many do not bloom all season, they lend themselves well to integration. This is particularly so in late summer when many roses have lost foliage from the bottom giving them a naked-knees effect.

In my research, I have come across an almost unlimited list of recommendations, as well as some "do's-and-don'ts" and other precautions in selecting the correct rose companions. Fortunately, roses are happy to share the stage. They will make themselves at home in the formal border, and they'll mix with annuals, perennials or a background of shrubs. Selecting the correct rose companions can give the rose garden an added touch of color and soften the harshness of the stick shapes of many roses.

Roses are heavy-feeders. Do not choose any plant that will steal nutrients from the roses (such as deep-rooted shrubs), or inhibit air circulation or light. Planting companion plants too close to your rose can lead to fungal or pest problems. Some devoted rose growers are usually reluctant to plant anything under or near a rose bush because of the gardener's occasional need to clean up underneath. Several diseases can work their way from the ground up, but in particular, so rosarians recommend raking up all fallen leaves and other debris on a regular schedule.

Avoid or grow elsewhere in your garden, plants with aggressive and invasive root systems, wide spreading plants, plants that attract white flies, and plants that become too tall in proportion to the roses. Examples of plants to avoid are: centranthus (red Valerian) it has a heavy, aggressive root system. Physostegia (false dragonhead) has an aggressive invasive root system. veronica longifolia is a magnet for white flies. Avoid planting two popular annuals – calendulas and marigolds – anywhere near your roses. They are hosts for thrips and spider mites, two difficult-to-control pests. Also, Zinnias can cause problems because they can promote rust.

Sandy Kennedy, of Kennedy Landscape Design Associates in L.A., finds annuals the most congenial companions for roses. She uses alyssum, lobelia and pansies, "scalloping" these plantings around and in front of the roses (though not directly under), where annuals help hide the bushes' often bare bases.

In his El Cajon garden, Richard Streeper, Consulting Rosarian and a former director of the American Rose Society, plants alyssum and forget-me-nots with his roses. He plants them from seed packets, and after they complete their cycle, he pulls them out and they come back in about three weeks from the residual seed. According to Streeper, he can get about four crops of these annuals into a year (the blue of the forget-me-nots is especially nice with the roses). And because they are routinely pulled out of the rose beds, he can do a complete cleanup several times a year. Behind his roses (Streeper), he plants his favorite annuals – delphiniums, the tall 'Giant Pacific' types, which are actually perennials, though most people replant them each fall or winter because they do not do as well after the first year. He plants them behind the roses because they are so tall (four to six feet) and because he likes the way the blue and purple flowers complement the colors of the roses.

In the First Lady's Garden at the Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace in Yorba Linda, Lew Whitney, of Roger's Gardens in Corona del Mar, planted many flowers that live in harmony

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with roses. Prominent perennial players include campanulas, coral bells, dianthus deltoides, lamb's ears, lavenders, linaria purpurea, penstemon, salvia chamaedryoides, scabiosa columbaria and two true geraniums, geranium incanum and geranium sanguineum. Lamb's ears, with its downy gray leaves, was a favorite with nearly all the experts. Whitney went so far as to call it "the number-one rose companion" because it is the right size (less than a foot) and the perfect color. All these perennials seem to thoroughly enjoy the water and fertilizer given the roses. And their colors are complementary: "They turn a rose garden into a flower garden", says Whitney.

Barry Campion, a Venice landscape designer and accomplished plants woman, has found that both the silver and the green santolina grow well with roses, though they must be cut back regularly to keep them neat. She also likes the blue-flowered, ground-covering morning glory (*Convolvulus mauritanicus*), verbena bipinnatifida and the striking euphorbia rigida. What is surprising is that these plants are considered drought tolerant, which makes them curious companions for the somewhat thirsty roses. Sandy Kennedy also uses santolina and the ground cover morning glory in rose beds. Some of her other favorites include big-leafed verbena, candytuft and saxifrage stolonifera, often called strawberry geranium. Underneath roses, she plants *Isotoma* and Australian violets (*Viola hederacea*).

In his own Altadena garden, Tom Carruth (Weeks Rose Nursery) has tried many potential companions. Some of his favorites include repeat-blooming iris and daylilies, which bloom more than one in the gardener's year. He has successfully tried several bulbs, including daffodils, dutch iris, and a strain of oxalis named 'Grand Duchess'. There are white, pink and lavender kinds of this oxalis grown from bulbs, and they grow and flower in the dead of winter when the roses are dormant, or nearly so. They spread quickly but grow only inches tall. Most gardeners find them easy to pull out of unwanted places. Successful perennials in Carruth's rose garden include several others (including trailing rosemary and sage), dwarf New Zealand flax, verbena bonariensis (which stands up tall between the roses) and *Rehmannia*. All of these can take the sometimes frequent watering (in summer, he irrigates about every three days), even though a few, like the rosemary and verbena, are considered drought tolerant.

Los Angeles garden designer Christine Rosmini likes the gray foliage of the white-flowered *Lychnis coronaria*, silver thyme and lamb's ears. She also likes the small-leafed pelargoniums, such as the nutmeg-scented "geranium" (*Pelargonium graveolens*) and the low spreading true geraniums such as 'Claridge Druce' - many feel that the true geraniums are the perfect rose companions. All of her choices are low, spreading or slightly mounding, and quite refined.

Sharon Van Enoo, who gardens in Torrance, can add a few more rose companions to the list, including heliotrope, blue bedding salvia (*Salvia farinacea*), dusty miller, (*Senecio cineraria*), asters, balloon flower, (*Platycodon grandiflorus*), veronicas, columbine, *Alstroemeria* and *Brachycome*.

Add up all these expert gardeners' suggestions, and you get more than forty spiffy plants, grown either for their flowers or foliage, that can be planted along with roses. With the rose-planting season ready to begin (typically just after Christmas), this might be a good time to find a few things to plant with them. For those who want to liven up an existing bed of roses, the one opportunity to get between the prickly roses is also near, when the roses get their annual pruning in January.