

Microclimates: Oxnard

By Barbara Osterberg

Walking through my neighborhood provides me inspiration to purchase new roses, redesign walkways or just to compare flowers. I scrutinize all the gardens, especially those with roses. I noticed that a particular rose garden had a couple of the same roses as mine, but they looked a little squirrely. Since the other roses in that garden looked healthy and vigorous, I doubt that those particular roses are treated any differently than the others. Both 'Queen Elizabeth' and 'Tiffany' roses were drastically different from mine. My roses looked more vigorous and had more blooms. That leads me to this month's newsletter theme, Micro Climate in Our Own Yards.

I live near the beach in Oxnard and it has been said that Queen Elizabeth and Tiffany will not do well in this area because of the fog and numerous cloudy days. Yet, they are the outstanding performers in my yard. Both are tall and hearty. They rarely get mildew and I must prune them often to keep them controlled. I've wondered over the years why they do so well.

While researching micro climates I found articles on Climate Zones, Heat Zones, and Temperature Zones. I didn't know a lot about "zones" before I started looking at the various zone maps. According to the USDA Hardiness Zone Finder, gardeners needed a way to compare their garden climates with the climate where a plant is known to grow well. That's why climate zone maps were created. Zone maps are tools that show where various permanent landscape plants can adapt. Zone maps convinced that I could grow anything in Oxnard because our weather is so mild. I figured that since I lived in Zone 12 (Sunset Western Garden Book) or Zone 10b (USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map), our mild climate would keep any plant from freezing, thus, all plants would do well. I am so wrong.

The Sunset Western Garden Book says that some plants can't live through a cold winter; and others require cold winters. Some plants don't like humidity, others depend on it. Remember, we are talking about climate, not weather. Weather determines if you need a rain coat today and climate is the accumulation of weather effects in our areas throughout the cycle of seasons.

As I kept reading, I discovered that cold isn't the only concern for our plants. We have drought, we have winds and we have heat. All these factors must be considered for our plants; which leads me to mention the AHS Heat Zone Map. This map was created using maximum daily high temperatures recorded between 1974 and 1995. (For example: The California coast would be zone # 2, which indicates that the average number of days per year above 86 degrees is between 1-7 days.)

The American Horticultural society (AHS) website discusses heat damage and how it affects our plants. Heat damage is more subtle than cold damage. The flower buds of a plant may wither; leaves may droop or become more attractive to insects. Plant death from heat is slow and lingering. To help prevent some of these problems, AHS states that garden plants are coded for heat tolerance.

Other factors such as day length, surrounding structures, air movement, and soil pH need to be considered for your plants needs. These will affect the health of your plant along with the zone that you live in and may create a micro climate zone.

Which leads me back to the question of why 'Queen Elizabeth' and 'Tiffany' flourish in my yard. I discovered a paragraph in the Sunset Western Garden book, dated 1988, that gives the reasons for my particular micro climate situation. It states:

"conditions in your garden or neighborhood can create micro climates (areas a few feet or a few hundred feet wide) that will be somewhat different from the general climate of your area (zone). A solid fence or row of dense evergreen trees at the bottom of a slope can trap cold

air and cause colder night temperatures there. A south-facing wall will accumulate heat, creating a warm microclimate”.

The answer to my long standing question is that the trellis in my front yard, which is covered with a thick ‘Mlle Cecile Brunner,’ is creating a micro climate that enables these particular roses to flourish. These roses are right next to the trellis, which provides enough protection from winds, fog and general dampness. Unfortunately, ‘Mlle Cecile Brunner’ will soon be removed and we’ll see if my theory is right.

Another thought: According to the Sunset Western Garden Book, Oxnard is Zone 24 which is perfect for fuchsias. Why the heck am I growing roses? Well, that is a story for another time.

Research taken from the United States National Arboretum website, Sunset Western Garden Book, American Horticultural Society and Reader’s Digest Illustrated Guide to Gardening