

Microclimates and Roses

By Ingrid Wapelhorst

When asked if I “like” a certain rose, I realize that my Thousand Oaks garden may not match that of the person asking the question.

Climate Zones

Thousand Oaks is in Climate Zone 9b (per the United States Department of Agriculture) and Climate Zone 21 (per the Sunset Western Garden book). Our temps range from nighttime temperatures near freezing for about a week each winter to highs of 98 to the low 100's for many weeks during the hottest summer months.

Throughout the year our nighttime temperatures regularly drop 15 or 20 degrees and sometimes as much as 30 degrees from daytime highs. Morning dew is a common sight as well as fog in the Spring. We have some Coastal influence and also live in a low elevation near a creek with a steep slope behind us, where even cooler and damper conditions prevail for the plants in that location. Additionally, there's rarely a day that most of our garden isn't subject to noticeable airflow—from a constant breeze to the drying and destructive effects of strong Santa Ana winds in our East-West exposure. Although the weather may change with the seasons, there are some constants about the different areas in our garden which dictate how the roses perform each year.

“Mini-Micro Climates”

In addition to our designated Climate Zones, we all find areas of our gardens which experience varying conditions for micro-climates and mini-microclimates. In our yard exposed brick planters and large beds between stucco walls and our concrete driveway get full sun on a Southern exposure; some rose beds are surrounded by well-irrigated sod and overspray from the sprinklers; other rose beds in the hardest, rockiest clay soil imaginable, accented and intertwined with perennials and annual plants where water drains very slowly. There are also sandy spots that drain so quickly that daily watering of plants is necessary. We have beds exposed to harsh winds and extreme heat reflected from surrounding surfaces in full day sun, roses in more protected areas, roses in afternoon shade, and even roses with only afternoon sun.

The steep slope in our back yard creates another “mini-micro climate,” where cold, damp air settles at the base and provides optimum conditions for rust and blackspot, requiring special spacing of the roses at that location to allow for better air circulation and exposure to the sun's rays. The “holding bed” for young potted plants was too close to this location to avoid a massive outbreak of rust and blackspot if plants aren't spaced quite far apart.

Since I've all but given up spraying of any kind for our roses the past few years, treating each rose bed as a unique “micro-mini climate” is essential. I inspect the leaves regularly for fungus problems, spray with a hose for aphids as needed, and check the moisture level of the soil around each one during the year to maintain the right amount of moisture for each bed as the weather changes. In the hottest months, we also spray down the roses in the hottest beds with a cold shower of water in the morning, allowing the plants to maintain necessary moisture in their leaves before the heat and winds dry them off again by the end of the day. Mulching has also become a priority again after a few years' absence, since extreme heat and drying winds create additional stress on the roses.

Each garden has many different needs, and I've found looking at and addressing the uniqueness of each garden bed and the needs of the different roses grown in each has made a significant difference in my bounty of beautiful rose blossoms throughout the year. Now when someone asks me if I “like” a certain rose, I'm more able to tell them “yes” or “no” based on what the rose actually does here and there and under what conditions.