

Relocating Roses

by Jim Delahanty (jjzdelahanty@earthlink.net)

Occasionally, a rose will have to be relocated from one place in the garden to another. The need arises because of some change in circumstances like the shadows from growing trees blocking sunlight to the rose, or, more likely, by an error in planting in the first place. Errors can range from a misunderstanding of the rose's habit for spreading like a moveable forest to the fact that California conditions can produce roses many times the size of their more sedate Eastern and Midwestern cousins.

Surprisingly, one question rarely addressed is whether or not the rose is worth moving in the first place. Sickly, diseased roses should be discarded quickly, if not surreptitiously. Roses unsuited to the climate should be given the mercy of Extreme Unction and pleasantly consigned to your garden history. Do you really want to invest the time and energy to saving a rose of dubious merit or one easily and cheaply replaced? If relocation is still necessary, there are basically two approaches to take..

One approach is to treat the rose like a bare root rose. Lift it, water it and replant it. The other approach is to treat the rose as if it were in a container by conserving as many roots as possible into a root ball and replanting the rose . Lift it, wrap it and replant it. These approaches have not changed in the last century of rose culture practices.

Many of the steps involved in either approach are pretty much the same. For both approaches, the time period for relocating roses is that stretch of the calendar concentrated around December, from the Thanksgiving holidays to the period after the first of the New Year. This is the time of the year when Southern Californian roses are mostly likely to approach dormancy. All authorities suggest watering the plant to be moved well on the day before the operation begins. Turgid rose plants apparently experience less transplant shock.

Both approaches require that the top part of the plant must be cut back. Even though the recommendations vary, the basic principle is that the remaining top foliage and canes must not stress the roots by attempting to sustain current growth. The efforts of the plant must be redirected into re-establishing the root growth. Thus, the Ortho Guide to Roses suggests that at least half the plant should be removed from the top; Jack Christensen in his "Official' Guide to Rose Growing in Southern California,' suggests that the top growth be reduced to about a foot in height or lower; some English books suggest a growth reduction to six inches or so. Probably the most reasonable suggestion is that the top growth should not exceed the size of the root mass removed from the soil as indicated by Liz Druitt and G. Michael Shoup in their classic 'Landscaping with Antique Roses.

Both approaches recommend that you cut around the base of the plant with a straight shovel—about 12 to 18 inches away from the center of the plant. Complete the circle around the plant. Use the shovel blade as a lever to loosen the soil under the plant, to cut the lateral roots extending beyond the circle, and to cut the roots under the plant. The root ball wrapped in burlap approach suggests that one month or no longer than six months prior to the attempted removal of the plant, the process of cutting around the plant and the severing of the extended roots should have taken place so as to promote the growth of new roots within the circled area and so as to provide a compact root ball for removal. However the recommended circle is half again as large--about 18 to 24 inches distance from the center of the plant. Some authors recommended sliding burlap or some other material beneath the roots so as to preserve the soil and fibrous roots together for the replanting. This also has the effect of giving the replanted rose a headstart through the existence of the more compact root ball. Christensen suggests shaking off

the excess soil instead.

Both approaches recommend the lopping off of any broken or damaged root edges.

The rose should be removed to its new location, planted as you would any other bare root or container rose with enough depth and width to accommodate the ultimate spread of the rose, and replanted at its original depth. Then the rose should be well watered. For Southern California the plant should be covered with soil or mulch so as to prevent the drying out of the canes by the frequent Santa Ana desiccating winds. When there appears to be new growth, wash off the mulch and water again. Alternatively, an anti-desiccant to prevent drying out of the canes might be used. Peter Schneider in 'Roses' recommends the provision of Vitamin B solution in order to reduce transplant shock on the theory that the addition will not harm the rose and may even do some good. The same advice can be given regarding prayer at the time of the replanting rite. In any case, the newly replanted roses should not be fed until there is sufficient growth on the plant to provide flower buds.

If the rose is to be moved some distance from its original location, the roots and/or the root ball must be kept moist for the duration of the time between removal from one hole to the replanting in another. Be cheered by the news that I once resuscitated roses that had been confined to the dark recesses of the U. S. Post Office for over twenty-one days.

Whether you treat the rose as a bare root rose ready to be inserted in the ground, or as a container rose ready for garden relocation, keep in mind that the rose is a tough plant, pretty much programmed to grow despite our interference in the process. Most likely the rose has survived previous relocations in the fields or greenhouses of this or some other country without any serious damage to its existence. And it will probably survive this relocation as well. Happy digging!