



Always Dream

Rose Rosette Disease Update

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It appears Rose rosette disease (RRD) is here to stay. I recently attended a presentation by a mentor, Dr Kevin Ong, professor and associate department head in the Department of Plant Pathology & Microbiology, TAMU, where he stated we need to rethink our approach to the disease. The disease was identified in the 1940s in Manitoba, Canada. It spread to California then the southern states. In 1990, George Philley reported the disease in East Texas.

RRD is a serious disease that can kill roses in Fort Bend County and Gulf Coast home landscapes. It affects shrub roses, landscape roses, climbers, and wild roses, and once a plant is infected there is no cure. In this region, long warm seasons, high humidity, and fast, vigorous growth can make routine rose inspection especially important. For FBC gardeners,

the best approach is to notice symptoms early, prune infected canes promptly, and maintain planting conditions that support healthy growth through heat and heavy summer weather.

The disease is caused by a virus that is spread mostly by tiny eriophyid mites. These mites are too small to see easily and can be carried by wind from one rose to another. In FBC neighborhoods, the risk can increase where roses are planted closely together, where overgrown landscapes limit air movement, or where neglected roses nearby are not removed. Because our weather can support a long growing season, it is wise to check roses often for unusual growth and to only buy plants from reputable sources.

Gardeners should watch for unusually thick or elongated shoots, clusters of distorted growth often called “witches’ broom,” leaves that stay twisted or narrow, flower buds that fail to open normally, and canes with excessive soft thorns. Because roses in our area often produce strong flushes of red new growth during warm, humid weather, red color alone is not enough to diagnose the disease. The more useful warning sign is growth that stays misshapen and does not mature into normal green leaves and balanced stems.

RRD guidance has changed. Years of research have improved our understanding of this disease, but some questions remain. The most cautious recommendation is still to remove the entire plant, including the root ball when possible. Earlier guidance assumed the infection was always systemic; current evidence suggests it may be systemic in some cases but not in others. Bag all removed plant material and place it in the trash rather than composting it. After removing a plant or infected canes, watch nearby roses closely, avoid overcrowding, and choose sites with full sun, good air circulation, and reliable drainage. In Fort Bend County gardens, better drainage, mulch, and wider spacing can help roses handle heavy rains and summer stress while making inspection easier. For replacement planting, many low-maintenance roses, including Earth-Kind selections, are practical options, but no rose should be considered immune to rose rosette disease. Because the disease does not persist in soil, replanting in the same area may be possible after cleanup.

References:

Claros, N.A., Shires, M., Mollov, D.S., Hammond, J., Jordan, R.L., Ochoa-Corona, F., Olson, J., Ong, K., and Salamanca, R. 2022. *Rose Rosette Disease: A Diagnostic Guide*.

<https://cdn-de.agrilife.org/extension/departments/plpm/plpm-pu-045/publications/files/rose-rosette-demystified-1.pdf>