

Old-Fashioned and Tough Modern Roses

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When we think of drought tolerant plants, we do not usually think of roses but there are a group of roses that are appropriate choices for a low water use landscape. It is even more amazing because these roses provide blooms for up to 8 months in a year without a spray program. Among the old-fashioned and tough modern roses in this extraordinary group are Belinda's Dream, Katy Road (Carefree Beauty Pink), Martha Gonzales, Mrs. Dudley Cross, Mutabilis, and Grandma's Yellow Rose.

Belinda's Dream produces a light pink bloom on an 6ft wide, 7 feet tall plant. If you have a strong sense of smell the rose is reported to have a pleasant fragrance. I have trouble detecting the fragrance, but I certainly notice the florist quality blooms that make excellent cut flowers and decorate the plant when it is used as a specimen planting in the landscape.

My favorite tough modern rose is Katy Road. Its official name is Carefree Beauty Pink, but many gardeners call it Katy Road because we thought it was an old-fashioned rose until some genetic work revealed its real history. Katy Road produces the same size plant as Belinda's Dream. The flowers are not easy to use as a cut flower because limited layers of petals form a flat bloom, but the bloom is larger and darker pink than Belinda's Dream. The plant also produces decorative rose hips which are eaten by the birds after sharing the stems with the blooms and decorating the plant for a large part of the bloom season. The two tough modern roses work well together in the same bed.

Mrs. Dudley Cross is an old-fashioned rose that produces a long season of cream-colored florist type flowers with an apricot blush. The plant is slightly larger (one foot taller and wider) than the Katy Road and Belinda's Dream roses but it still works well in a shared bed. Mrs. Dudley Cross is unique in that it is thornless. The flowers work as cut flowers but do not provide a fragrance.

The Martha Gonzales is an old-fashioned rose that grows to 3 feet tall and four feet across. The new foliage is red tinted and shiny. The flowers are only an inch and half across, but they are blood red and cover the plant. In addition to the decorative value of the flowers and leaves Martha Gonzales is especially useful as a traffic director. The thorns are not savage, but they are sharp enough to keep pedestrians on the sidewalks and out of the gardens on high traffic entrances to churches and offices in downtown settings.

Mutabilis is very different from Martha Gonzales. It grows to 8 feet tall and 10 feet in diameter and blocks traffic rather than directs it. A single mutabilis plant is large enough to provide cover for nesting and insect hunting birds. A hedge of the roses makes great wildlife cover. As impressive as the mutabilis is as wildlife cover it also has attractive flowers over a long season. The 4-inch flat blooms start out as yellow, change to pink, and then finish as crimson.

Grandma's Yellow is a hybrid tea rose that was selected from a search by Jerry Parsons, Greg Grant, and a volunteer team to find a rose with yellow flowers that was in the same toughness league as Belinda's Dream. The flowers are attractive and make good cut flowers. They also survive in minimal care beds along with Katy Road and Belinda's Dream.

The “tough” roses survive with minimum care but will bloom more if they receive a cup of fertilizer now and some irrigation in the hot summer. Plant them in full sun. All the varieties described are available at neighborhood nurseries in the San Antonio area.