

Roses: Grafted vs. Own Root

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Labeling on roses describes the type, fragrance, planting instructions, and a colorful picture of that particular rose variety. What the label does not tell you, however, is whether the rose in the package/pot is on its own roots or grafted to another type of rose or rootstock.

How can one tell the difference? Grafted roses have a knot-like structure where the graft was made and it is from this that the canes of the rose variety depicted on the package will originate. If the rose is in a pot, this roundish “knot” will be just above the soil line. If the rose is bareroot, for example in a plastic bag with shavings or peat moss, the knot will be above, or just below, the tie on the bag. (Note: When planting a grafted rose, the graft should always be above the soil line.)

Own root roses, by comparison, send up new growth or canes directly from the root system or at the base of a strong cane.

From the large rose producer’s standpoint, a grafted rose is far more economical to produce than one on its own roots. Roses reach market size in half the time, bareroot packaging takes up less space, and shipping costs are minimal by comparison to shipping large plants of equal size housed in a pot. Other benefits include using different rootstocks for various growing conditions – i.e. fortuniana rootstock for sandy soils where nematodes are a problem, multiflora rootstock for northern climates, and Dr. Huey rootstock for more clayish soils.

The downside to grafted roses from a producer’s perspective has been the introduction of mosaic virus into many varieties. Plants with this virus tend to be stunted, with what appears to be variegated leaves of various patterns. Unfortunately, there is no cure, and once a “mother” plant is infected, all the buds removed from it for grafting purposes carry the infection and will in turn infect the newly grafted plant as well.

Home gardeners also experience a downside with grafted roses. If the graft and the canes attached to it dies, so does the variety that they purchased. The rootstock may begin to grow, but it is not a desirable addition to the garden as they are typically rambling, once blooming varieties. Another downside to the grafted rose plant relates to its longevity in the garden. Most grafted roses do not live past the 15 year mark, whereas own root roses can live for half a century or better.

Own root roses do take a little longer to get established, but once they are, tend to be hardier, able to handle stress better, and overall be a healthier plant.

Producers are recognizing the homeowner’s need for plants that can stand the test of time and are beginning to offer many varieties on their own roots.