

“Some people grumble that roses have thorns; I am grateful that thorns have roses.” — Alphonse Karr, *A Tour Round My Garden*

Roses have always been a favorite of mine. Biased since birth having been given the flower’s moniker for my middle name, the sweet-scented beauties catch my eye and nose wherever I go.

A couple of years ago one of the residents in our neighborhood, who holds a degree in horticulture, introduced me to a dreaded disease that attacks and kills roses. Even the tough-as-nails Knockout variety is not immune. They say ignorance is bliss and in some ways the world would be rosier (sorry, couldn’t help myself) had I stayed unenlightened. But since we cannot unlearn what we know and education may stop the spread of this disease then I consider this bad news worthy of sharing. Just remember, I’m only the messenger.

So, what is it exactly? Most of us who have roses are familiar with the common black spot fungus and powdery mildew. But this is something different. First discovered in 1940, **Rose rosette virus (RRV)** is a disease primarily spread by tiny *eriophyid mites* that feed on the rose and spread the virus.

There was a brief time when the Rose rosette virus was praised for killing the invasive multiflora rose that was taking over highway medians throughout the East and Midwest. Unfortunately, the virus finished killing off the multiflora rose and started moving into the south where it targeted the Knockout roses and any other rose in its path.

Can anything be done to stop Rose rosette? No. Basically it spreads to every part of the plant. Quickly removing the bright-red shoot clusters by cutting through healthy green wood below them might save a rose. But to quote *Southern Living Magazine’s* Grumpy Gardener, Steve Bender, “once a rose gets full-blown Rose rosette, turn out the lights. You must pull up the rose, roots and all, bag it, and throw it out with the trash. Spraying will not work.”

There is one nursery specialist who suggests “pruning back the plants by 2/3 while they are dormant in late winter to remove any overwintering mites and eggs in the bud crevices.” CAUTION! If you prune any diseased roses, remember to disinfect your shears with bleach before using them again.

¹How do you recognize Rose rosette virus? Check this list for common symptoms:

- Shoots and foliage have an abnormal red color

- Stems appear thick and succulent
- Rapidly elongating shoots
- Shoots with shortened internodes
- Stems with an overabundance of pliable thorns
- New growth may have many branches that create a witch's broom (similar to glyphosate--Roundup-- injury)
- Distorted or dwarfed leaves (similar to 2.4-D --weed killer-- injury)
- Deformed buds and flowers
- Abnormal flower and leaf color
- Lack of winter hardiness
- Spiral cane growth

¹ http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/pests/plant_pests/flowers/hgic2109.html

And if all of this information isn't discouraging enough, please know this virus is not biased. It can attack any rose bush at any time. The mites are so tiny they simply blow into gardens on the wind.

(**Photo 1:** Knockout rose overabundance of pliable thorns and many branches that look like a witch's broom; **Photo 2:** deformed buds and flowers and leaves a paler shade of yellow green; **Photo 3:** at the left of the Knockout rose see bright red and deformed buds, abnormal leaf color, with the healthy side still showing pretty dark pink blooms and dark green leaves; **Photo 4:** several clusters of deformed abnormal red new growth on a Drift rose)

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