Whether you are cutting roses from your garden for your coffee table, show table, or for a friend, you want the roses to last the longest time possible in a vase. There are many books and articles written on how to keep cut roses alive for a week or more—including a study by Israeli and Australian researchers in which Viagra was added to the vase water!

Some of the more conventional practices for extending the vase life of your garden roses will be covered below. However, it is important to first understand that a garden rose differs from a florist rose in several very important ways. Florist roses were developed to be grown in a greenhouse where all growing conditions can be carefully monitored and controlled. They typically have exceptional flower form and petals with great substance (texture, crispness, and firmness). They are bred to open slowly as blooms and hang on tightly to their petals. Florist roses often require more spraying for diseases if grown outside, and the blooms may be smaller due to higher daytime temperatures. David Austin has a cut flower line in addition to his garden rose line where the odds are 100,000:1 that a rose will meet the criteria to be a promising florist rose. These selected roses are all grown in greenhouses and are not sold as garden plants. Garden roses are bred to be grown in the garden. Hardier than florist roses, their vase life is usually shorter than that of a florist rose. The blooms may open too quickly, shatter too easily (drop petals), or be too heavy for their stems and nod or droop in the vase.

What, then, can we do to extend the vase life of our garden roses for the longest possible time indoors? Try some of these ideas and see what works for you:

- Roses cut in the early part of the morning last longer than roses cut in the middle of the day. This is due to the high moisture content of their blooms and leaves. Later in the day, the rose is using water to help in photosynthesis, transportation of nutrients, and in cooling. Late evening when the rose is rebuilding its water supply is another good time to cut blooms as long as the temperature has cooled considerably. The rose will have more stored food in it at the end of the day allowing it to have a longer vase life.

- Cut roses after the sepals have turned down. Sepals are the green, leaf-like structures which cover a bud. If you gently squeeze the bud, and it feels like a marble, don’t cut the bud. It will most likely not open. If it feels soft, the bud can be cut and will usually open in a vase.

- Cut roses with fewer petals when their sepals are down, but the petals are only about one-third open. Roses with lots of petals need to open a few rows of petals before being cut.

- Place the cut roses immediately in warm water. A bloom saver is a handy tool to carry around the garden when cutting flowers so they can go immediately in water.
When you cut a garden rose, leave the guard petals on as long as possible. Guard petals are the outer petals which protect the flower bud. They may be larger and thicker, malformed, or show streaks of color or be off-color. For exhibitors, removing the guard petals too early may cause your bloom to open fully before judging is finished. If your bloom has an abundance of very thin petals, then removing the guard petals may help it open more fully. If your bloom is too tight, then removing the guard petals as early as possible might help it open sooner.

Keep your pruners, vases, and water as clean as possible. Use a 5% solution of bleach to sanitize the vases and equipment and rinse well.

Use glass, pottery, or porcelain containers avoiding metal containers which shorten the life of your roses.

If you are using wet floral foam inside the vase, be sure to soak it in warm water with a preservative first.

Use a flower food dissolved in lukewarm water according to the manufacturer’s directions. If you want to make your own flower food dissolve half a teaspoon of sugar in a quart of water with a teaspoon of fresh lemon juice and a few drops of bleach. The sugar will provide a supply of food for the flower. Most floral preservatives provide sugar to supply energy to the flower, contain a bactericide to control bacteria that decays the stem and prevents water uptake, and supply an acidifier to bring the pH closer to 4.5. Aspirin and pennies do not prolong the life of cut flowers.

Cut the stems under water at least one inch from the bottom, making a slanted cut. Be careful not to crush the stems. Keep your pruners sharp. Dull scissors will crush the stems inhibiting the uptake of water. The rose needs to draw up water through open cells. If a stem is bent or broken, cut about half an inch above the injured area. Cut the stems longer in the garden so recutting once or twice inside does not shorten the stem too much for the vase.

Conditioning the blooms after re-cutting means to place the stem in water containing only a bactericide (no food) and then store the container of cut flowers in a cool, humid place, free from drafts for several hours or overnight. Next, you would place the blooms in a vase with preservative added to the water.

Remove foliage which will be in the vase water. Any plant material in the water will decay and contaminate the water. Be careful to not bruise, cut or scrape the stem surface when pulling off foliage. Doing this opens the surface allowing bacteria to enter.

Check the water level daily and add water as needed to the vase.

If blooms look wilted and need reviving, try submerging the entire bloom flat in a pan of warm water for 20 minutes to an hour.

Every second day or sooner if the water becomes cloudy in the vase, rinse the stems and change the water. Recut the stems again.

Remove all wilted and dying flowers from the vase so they do not contaminate the water in the vase and cause the rest of the blooms to die more quickly.

Keep the temperature of the room cool and the vase out of direct sunlight, drafts from air conditioning vents, and any sources of heat.

If you want the blooms to open more quickly or if the bloom and foliage look wilted, try using warmer water.
• If you plan to refrigerate roses, make sure the temperature is 35 to 37 degrees F. If you have a frost free refrigerator, place a baggy over the bloom to keep the bloom from drying out.

• Never store your flowers with fruits, vegetables or decaying, plant materials. Ethylene gas is given off by these items which will cause the flowers to close up or wilt rapidly and die.

• NEVER mist garden roses.

• Treat yourself and your guests to a vase filled with beauty and delight!

 Tempest in a Teapot!
( Photo by Jerry Haynes)