Cutting, Storing, and Transporting Roses for Exhibition
By: John P. Mattia, jpmattia@aol.com

Cutting and storing roses, and transporting them to rose shows are techniques that each rosarian develops to fit his or her particular interest and level of involvement in exhibiting. At one end of the scale is the casual exhibitor who picks roses the morning of a rose show, places them in a bucket, and drives off to a local rose show. At the other end is the exhibitor who collects blooms up to a week before a show, places them in a separate refrigerator devoted to storing roses, carts them in a specially built transportation box, and flies off to a national rose show. In between are rosarians who use all sorts of cutting, storage, and transit techniques and tricks to join in the sharing the beauty of the rose with the American public at a rose show.

Cutting Roses for Exhibition

A rose, as all living things, needs water to survive. Once severed from the bush, the bloom and its stem are cut off from the roots that constantly supplied the water needed to help produce the exhibition rose. This flow of water must be replaced by artificial means to continue providing water through the severed stem to the bloom in order for it to survive in all its glory until show time. This process is enhanced if the rose is cut when its moisture content is highest, and then is rapidly cooled to slow down its need for water.

During daylight hours, a rosebush extensively uses water to help in photosynthesis, to transport nutrients throughout the bush, and to cool the plant in the hot sun. Since the demand for water is highest at this time, roses picked during the middle of a hot day tend to wilt even if they are immediately placed in water. The wilting proves that no artificial water supply system can replace the efficiency of the roots in providing this basic ingredient to the rose.

In contrast, roses picked early in the morning just after sunrise tend to survive better than roses picked later in the day. In early morning the moisture content of the blooms and leaves is at its highest and the bush's demand for water is lower than at any other period. A second favorite time for exhibitors to pick roses is at sunset. At this time, the rosebush has had some time to rebuild its water supply, since photosynthesis has stopped and the need to cool the bush has abated.

If the weather is really hot, some rosarians wait until several hours after sunset to cut specimens for rose shows. These rosarians are known to pick roses while using a flashlight to find their way around the garden in the dark. By waiting until several hours after sunset to cut roses, the rosebush has had a chance to fully replace the water needed to have the bloom survive better once it is severed from its roots. One trick that works for nighttime culling of roses is to wrap a thin piece of white paper around the stem of a potential show bloom before sunset at the point where it is to be later cut. The white paper makes it is easy to find the point-to-cut on the stem in the dark. It avoids cutting the wrong rose among a thicket of thorny stems.
Once cut, a rose is immediately placed in water. Some rosarians place all their roses in one community bucket as they cut them. However, care must be given when removing the roses from a community bucket to avoid entangling leaves and stems, and ripping or spoiling a bloom that brushes against a thorn. Some exhibitors prevent this problem by placing each rose upon cutting it into its own container with water. A simple way to achieve this private berthing of roses is to place each one in a separate milk carton with its top cut off, and then set each carton in a milk crate.

After cutting a rose, rosarians clean the specimen's leaves and stems. A damp cotton cloth works best for this task. Use nothing but water in this process since it is against exhibition rules to apply a polish or other material to buff the leaves. Detecting a foreign substance on rose leaves is a cause for disqualification of any entry in a rose show.

Once the leaves and stems are clean, many rosarians re-cut under water. About a half-inch of the bottom of the stem is cut off with a sharp pruners to renew a steady supply of water to the specimen. (The passage may have been blocked with air that entered the stem when first cut in the garden.) Rosarians don't clean or groom a bloom at this stage. They wait until they are at the rose show before undertaking the grooming of the bloom.

Determining the ideal stage of bloom to cut and store a rose for exhibition depends on several factors and involves some guess work. Most roses will continue to open after they are cut even if they are refrigerated. Another factor is the season when the roses are cut. Generally, those picked for exhibition in the spring will open faster than those blooms cut for fall exhibition. Also, roses picked on hot days will open faster than those picked on cool days. It helps to keep records on the stage a particular rose is cut and then on how it behaves under refrigeration and in transit to a show. In time, these records tell rosarians when to pick and how to transport specific roses most successfully.

Generally, roses with fewer petals should be cut when the bloom is one-third to less than one-half open. Roses with more petals should be cut at or just beyond the one-half open stage. Experience with specific roses will vary somewhat from these general guidelines. For instance, First Prize, a rose with relatively few petals, does not advance much after it is cut and cooled. It should be picked when it is more than half open despite its low petal count. Uncle Joe, a rose with more than 80 petals, should be cut right at exhibition stage since the bloom will not continue to open once picked.

**Storing and Refrigerating Roses**

At the first stage of exhibiting, most rosarians just store their roses in a cool, dark place in the cellar. They then move on to taking over the family refrigerator for storing roses several days before a rose show. In time, serious exhibitors find an old refrigerator and use it exclusively for storing roses in advance of a show.
If one uses a frost-free refrigerator, it is advisable to place a baggy over each bloom. Air is forcefuly circulated to remove water vapor in a frost-free refrigerator. The baggy limits the drying effect this moving air has on the bloom.

The ideal temperature to store roses is 34° to 37°F. It is wise to run several tests with roses in the refrigerator to ensure that the temperature control is reliable before attempting to store blooms intended for exhibition in this degree range. If the temperature drops below 32°, the bloom will suffer frostbite. Often this damage is not visible until several hours after the bloom is removed from the refrigerator and is placed on the exhibition table.

**Transporting Roses to a Rose Show**

Rosarians use many techniques to transport roses to a rose show to ensure that they are protected against damage and are kept cool. Generally, the farther one has to travel to a show, the more protection and effective cooling the roses need.

To bring roses to a local show, it may only be necessary to carefully place the roses in a bucket or two. To minimize the tangling of leaves and stems, carefully put the roses, one at a time, into a bucket. Be systematic about this, placing them clockwise starting at 12 o'clock, and removing them moving counterclockwise from 11 o'clock. Remove them only once - at the show. A better method is to wrap each rose in a cone made of freezer paper with the waxed surface of the paper on the inside of the cone, and then place the wrapped roses in a bucket.

For longer trips to rose shows, rosarians use insulated boxes that have ice packs to cool the roses during transit. In one type of homemade box, roses are stored vertically in cylinders made of a plastic liter soda bottle and freezer paper. An inch of water is placed in the cylinder before each stem is carefully stuffed into it. This method works well for travel by automobile. However, competition at national rose shows often requires travelling by air with roses. For air travel, rosarians transport their roses in a horizontal position. Each stem is placed through a rubber stopper into a small tube of water, and is then held in place in rows of racks in the box. These boxes are usually custom made by the exhibitor. It is also possible to convert a large picnic chest into a rose carrier for such travel. Roses can last up to 48 hours in well-insulated boxes or chests.

The same cutting, storage, and transportation techniques work for all types of roses. Of course, the containers are selected in proportion to the size of the roses.