

The Rugged Rugosa

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Rosa rugosa is native from Japan to coastal Siberia, but they've been cultivated and naturalized in many parts of the world. The rugosa and its hybrids have received renewed attention in recent years, particularly among folks who've hoped this disease-resistant rose might be the alternative to dosing bushes with stinky fungicides.

There are good reasons why people love them:

- *Unparalleled hardiness:* Rugosas will grow in Cleveland, North Dakota as easily as in Cleveland, Texas. But they'll be more appreciated in the former than the latter, because northern gardeners haven't been able to grow most of the fashionable hybrid teas and floribundas. Rugosas are unfazed by bitter cold: both the Canadian Explorers and Parklands series, hardy to -35°F , owe their ruggedness to rugosa DNA.
- *Rich, green foliage:* *Rugosa* is from the Latin word "rugose," meaning wrinkled. Rugosa leaves are textured with a fine quilting that gives the foliage depth and richness. A few even put on a modest display of autumn color.
- *Disease resistance:* *Rosa rugosa* (species) simply doesn't get the diseases that so bedevil other roses. Its blackspot resistance is legendary. That's the chief reason rugosas are consistently at the top of the ARS rating scale for shrubs.
- *Amazing perfume:* The fragrance of the best rugosas isn't subtle or nuanced: it's powerful. When the *Rosa rugosa x alba* hedge around [Longwood Garden's](#) (Kennett Square, Pennsylvania) herb garden is in its first flush of May bloom, you only need to be in the general vicinity to be hit by fragrance.
- *Fruit as pretty as the flowers:* One of the most memorable garden show displays I've seen featured a row of potted rugosas that had been allowed to set cherry-tomato-sized hips. Against the rich foliage, the effect of the prominent orange-red fruit was arresting.
- *Drought and salt resistance:* Rugosa is the only rose on most xeriscaping plant lists. While they won't get as lush on short water rations, they'll survive and flower. They flourish on Maine's seawater-splashed beach dunes, which makes them ideal for landscaping near winter-salted roads.



- *Growth in limited light:* No rose will grow in full shade, but I've seen happy rugosas in only a few hours of sun.

Given all that, why isn't everyone, everywhere, growing rugosas all the time? Because for all their virtues, rugosas have limitations:

- *Smallish, often simple flowers:* Rugosa blossoms are pretty, but they're not what most folks think of as classic rose blossoms. The species rugosa has single flowers, and while hybridization has introduced doubleness, individual blossoms usually won't stop you in your tracks (though the effect of a bush in full flower may).
- *Short stems:* With most rugosas, blossoms pop out in clusters at leaf axils of branch tips, which makes cutting (except for floating in a bowl) not especially practical. Rugosa blossoms are best enjoyed on the bush.
- *A limited color palette:* To paraphrase Henry Ford's quip about the Model T, you can have any color rugosa you want, as long as you want magenta or pink. That's an exaggeration, of course: breeding has produced some good whites, as well as a handful of yellows and reds (though no true orange—slightly-peachy *Vanguard* comes closest). Other colors are a minority to the pinks, though, and aren't always as pretty or usable.
- *Limited repeat:* Rugosas are labeled remontant, but repeats may be weak or non-existent, especially in hot summer areas.
- *Big bushes, lots of thorns:* A few exceptions (check out the Pavement series, and *Frau Dagmar Hartopp*), but most rugosas get large enough to reach out and grab passersby by the sweater. And most won't respond well to heavy cut backs.
- *Weedy growth habit:* A few rugosa bushes are compact, but even those get a rangy, twiggy look as the summer heats up. Shrubs that caught my eye in May rarely do much for the landscape by August. (They seem to last better in cool summer climates.) I've seen rugosas used attractively in landscapes, but rarely will they look as good for as long a time as current landscaping faves like *Knockout* and *Nearly Wild*.
- *The hybridization factor:* A new gene pool introduces qualities we want (like flower doubling or a new color), but it may also dilute desirable qualities. *Linda Campbell*, for example, is a splendid rugosa hybrid, with tresses of unusually long-lasting red flowers. But its leaves aren't noticeably rugose, there's no fragrance, and it can get blackspot.

Cultivation and Use

Rugosas like pretty much what all roses like: well-drained soil, a good nutrient and pH balance, and plenty of sun. But they'll survive and even do quite well with less, which is why the rugosa is as good a rose for the chemical-free, organics-only garden as you're going to find. Fertilize on the lean side; rugosas especially dislike the rapid release of nutrients from water-soluble fertilizer (MiracleGro® and the like) and foliar feeding can defoliate them.

Unlike most garden roses, rugosas object to heavy pruning. When you use them in landscaping, anticipate the fully-grown bush size and let them grow.

I find it hard, for that reason, to use them effectively in small suburban yards; I've liked rugosas best in large country landscapes, where they can soar or flop about as they like, and where their undisciplined habit fits a larger, less formal setting.

Cultivars

Here's a sampling of some frequently mentioned rugosa varieties:

- *Rosa rugosa species*: The patriarch of the family, a tough, vigorous pink rose, with fragrance, hips, and the typical rugosa overgrown habit. *X alba* is especially pretty. Makes a quite impenetrable hedge.
- *Blanc Double de Courbet*: A favorite bright white landscape rugosa, whose good favor is mostly deserved. Gertrude Jekyll loved it, though others dislike that it holds on to spent blossoms as unappealing brown blobs. (For just as sparkling a white but more petals, try *Blanc Double's* sport, *Souvenir de Philemon Cochet*.)
- *Linda Campbell*: My favorite rugosa hybrid, it deserves to be grown much more than it is. Pure red clusters on an arching bush or short climber. The most attractive presentation I've seen of it is in the Cleveland (Ohio) Botanical Garden, where it fountains from the top of a tall tuteur like an enormous bouquet.
- *Thérèse Bugnet*: A good double pink landscaping rugosa, championed most recently by that well-known know-it-all [Martha Stewart](#). It may mildew.
- *Hansa*: A double pink rugosa you'll often see on old farmsteads or in country cemeteries. Prettier than the species, and slower growing.
- *Frau Dagmar Hartopp*: A commonplace single pink, whose most noteworthy feature is its compact bush.
- The *Grootendorsts* : Big, robust blooming machines. Choose pink, red or white blossoms, all with a charming carnation-like fringe—but no fragrance.
- The Explorer and Parkland roses: series bred by the Canadian government agriculture ministry for severe winters, they owe their toughness to rugosa genes.

The Future of Rugosas

Disease resistance, drought resistance, and strong fragrance are qualities that rose gardeners persistently ask for. In an industry where each year's new rose introductions are only subtly distinguishable from the last year's, you'd think that a rose offering as many distinctive qualities as the rugosa does would stimulate dozens of new introductions. Most years, though, even one new rugosa is a surprise. Getting something distinctly different without sacrificing any of rosa rugosa's virtues takes generations of breeding; according to breeders, fertility problems with rugosa crosses have made that difficult.

So getting a really remarkable and marketable rose, already a high-stakes gamble, is even more complicated with rugosas.



Perhaps these newer varieties with especially appealing features will stimulate renewed interest among gardeners and breeders:

- *Moore's Striped Rugosa*: A unique presentation for a rugosa, this is new on the American market for '05. Coming from the redoubtable Ralph Moore, be quite sure it will be worth growing.
- *Basye's Purple*: Blossoms of an unusual dark wine-red shade—single, but striking.
- *Rugelda*: A Kordes bicolor, soft yellow double with pink highlights.
- Look, too, for the [Agri-Food Canada Morden Research Station](#) (creator of the Parkland series) to crank out some great new offerings with rugosa heritage.



For More Study

The “bible” for rugosa fanciers is [Suzanne Verrier's Rosa Rugosa](#) , an exquisitely photographed book that will have you coveting every rose in it. I also like [Hardy Roses, by Robert Osborne and Beth Plawning](#). Dozens of nurseries and fan sites have good [essays about and photos of rugosas](#).

Photo credits:

R. rugosa, photo by Steve Jones

R. rugosa alba hips, photo by Jolene Adams

R. rugosa var. Pink Grootendorst and F.J. Grootendorst, photo by Jolene Adams

Moore's Striped Rugosa, courtesy of [Sequoia Nursery](#)