

Garden Wise Gazette

Texas AgriLife Extension Service — Collin County

Lessons and Beauty Nearby: Crape Myrtle Trails

There are many public places in Collin County and nearby areas that offer outstanding lessons for gardening within our region. We are continuing our profiles of different garden sites in the area, and this showcase can be found throughout McKinney: The Crape Myrtle Trails.

Ribbons and Pockets of Color
By Katherine Ponder

McKinney is on its way to becoming the crape myrtle capital of the world. The Crape Myrtle Trails of McKinney Foundation was created in 1998, and planting of these floriferous trees began in earnest.

“Today there are about 15 miles of crape myrtles,” said Foundation Executive Director Susan Owens. “That’s between 7,500-10,000 trees, and about 75-80 varieties.”



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Winter 2010

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- * Soil amendments will help all your plants.
- * Plan now for seeds, vegetables
- * Sprinklers and smart irrigation need some attention before spring and summer watering.
- * Early to mid February is the right time to prune roses.

Soil Amendments: No debate

By Beth Mortenson

The best way to guarantee that garden plants will thrive and perform to expectation is to properly prepare the soil. Literally, the soil is the very foundation of plant life. The soil provides the structure

within which the plant can grow and anchor itself, the nutrients the plant requires for vigorous growth and vitality, and the water, which assists in the uptake of nutrients and cools the plant by way of transpiration.

Soil consists of weathered rock (minerals), organic material (decaying plants and animals), microorganisms (ex:



Best Crape Myrtles

A group of Texas and national experts recommend these crape myrtles.

Explanation of Sizes:

Dwarf: 3-5 feet tall; Intermediate: 5-10 feet tall; Medium: 10-20 feet tall; Tall: More than 20 feet tall

Red

Dwarf: Cherry Dazzle
Intermediate: Cheyenne, Tonto
Medium: Centennial Spirit, Country Red, Dynamite, William Toovey
Tall: Arapaho, Red Rocket

Pink

Dwarf: Pokomoke
Intermediate: Hopi, Pecos
Medium: Osage, Pink Velour, Seminole, Sioux, Tuskegee
Tall: Biloxi, Choctaw, Potomac, Tuscarora

Lavender

Dwarf:
Intermediate:
Medium: Apalachee, Lipan, Yuma
Tall: Muskogee

Purple

Dwarf: Centennial, Velma's Royal Delight
Intermediate: Zuni,
Medium: Catawba, Powhatan
Tall: Twilight

White

Dwarf: n/a
Intermediate: Acoma (spreading), White Chocolate
Tall: Fantasy, Glendora White, Kiowa, Natchez, and Townhouse



Crape Myrtle Sale:

May 15, 2010

North Haven Gardens Visit

www.crapemyrtletrails.org for more info.

Crape Myrtle Trails (Continued from page 1)

Ten of these miles are along El Dorado Parkway, starting at the far east end of Highway 5 (McDonald Street) and El Dorado. This ribbon of color extends all along El Dorado into the Stonebridge area. You can also see impressive shows along Stonebridge Drive, between El Dorado and 380. Starting this fall, "The World Collection" Park at Craig Ranch will begin taking shape. This seven-acre park will feature four "rooms" of color, divided by white crape myrtles.

Crape myrtles are ablaze with color during the third week in June. Owens is expecting a great display this summer, thanks to the rain we've received so far over the fall and winter months. When you go to the trails, you'll see many varieties, including:

Choctaw-pale pink
Country Red- Lipan-lavender
Miami-dark pink
Sarah's Favorite-white
Yuma-medium lavender

Winter is also a great time to check out the crape myrtles' bark, which can put on quite a show all by itself. You may see cinnamon-colored bark and peeling bark, all perfectly normal for select types of these hard-working trees.

Crape myrtles are very forgiving and easy to grow. Even in droughts and freezes, the crape myrtles have endured. Owens notes that they require relatively low maintenance. "The city parks department mows around them and mulches, but we really leave it mostly organic." A few years ago, the trees seemed to have Azalea Bark Scale, and crape myrtles were a new host plant. Texas AgriLife Extension entomologists began to investigate and is working to develop management recommendations.

The McKinney Crape Myrtle Trails are a great example of why these trees and shrubs do *not* need to be topped off or pruned heavily. They retain their beautiful form annually without getting those gnarled stubs that come from brutal pruning.

For information on crape myrtle varieties, visit:

http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/PLANTanswers/trees/crapemyrtle/crape_myrtle_varieties.html

For information on The Crape Myrtle Trails, park and foundation:

<http://www.crapemyrtletrails.org/index> 🌳



Soil Amendments (Continued from page 1)

bacteria, fungi, earthworms), and air space. According to Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, a healthy composition of these materials would be 45-50% solid mineral material, .05-3% organic material, and 50% open pore space. Optimally, the open pore space would be filled with 50% air and 50% water.

It is not very likely that the soil North Texans will find in their backyard gardens will initially have this ideal composition, however. Most soils in the area consist of heavy clay. Clay is not only difficult to work with, but lacks the open pore space that is needed for water and air. Clay soils typically lack organic matter.

The best way to improve soil health is to add organic matter. Organic matter is material that was once alive such as leaves, straw, manures, and compost. Compost is the end result of decomposed organic matter. All soils, sandy and heavy clay soils alike, can benefit greatly from the addition of organic matter and expanded shale. In the sandy soil, the organic matter will hold the water in the soil and make it available for the plants, and in the clay soils, the organic matter allows for air space and better drainage.

The greatest benefit from the addition of this organic material is the increased presence and activity of beneficial organisms in the soil. Compost itself is not exceedingly high in essential nutrients, but as earthworms and microorganisms work the soil, they turn organic matter into a nutrient-rich product which can then be taken up by the plant material. More organic material in the soil leads to a greater population of macro- and microorganisms. The addition of compost is a perfect way to condition the soil. Apply compost regularly so that the cycle of nutrient break-down is a continuous one.

Top the conditioned soil with a thick layer of mulch. Mulching the landscape has several wonderful benefits. As a soil amendment, organic-based mulch, such as wood chips, pine needle, and leaves, will continue the conditioning process for years to come. As it breaks down, organic mulch gives the soil additional structure and adds airspace. Place new mulch upon the old as it ages.

As for leaves, leave them be. The leaves that fall from the trees have the very nutrients that the tree will need in the spring for its new growth. If necessary for the sake of tidiness, shred them and use them as mulch or simply work them into the soil.

These straightforward practices will produce a healthy soil in which plants will thrive. Each year the process will become easier as the microorganisms that have been invited into such a healthy environment do most of the work. 🌱



Plant Sale
Coming UP



The Collin County **Master Gardeners'** Spring Plant sale is just around the corner. Mark your calendars, come EARLY for good selection, and bring cash or check (no credit cards accepted).

This always-popular sale has hard-to-find plants that are suited for our area. Previous **"hot" sellers** have included recommended varieties of crape myrtles, maple trees, citrus trees, Turk's cap, autumn sage, heuchera, salvia, sun coleus, multiple colors of lantana, pentas, petunias, scaevola, and much more. Visit <http://ccmgatx.org> closer to the sale date for an updated list of **plants that we'll be selling**.

CCMGA members will be on hand to answer questions, give educational presentations, and lead **children's demonstrations**. While we have flats and wagons **to borrow, you won't** have to wait on them if you bring your own!

April 24,
9 a.m. - 3 p.m.
17360 Coit Road
Dallas, Texas
75252

[Map](#)



Smart irrigation: not so smart

By Robert Burns

COLLEGE STATION – Tests of "smart" irrigation controllers found most of the devices currently on the market were not as smart as hoped, said [Texas AgriLife Extension Service](#) irrigation experts.

The six devices tested, all currently on the market, applied from about one-third to two-and-a-half times more water than was recommended, according to Charles Swanson, AgriLife Extension associate with the [Texas A&M University department of biological and agricultural engineering](#).

"These devices have the potential to save water, but our data shows they're just not there yet," Swanson said.

Smart controllers use weather data to automatically adjust the amount of irrigation water applied. Some smart controllers use sensors at the irrigation sites to measure temperature and rainfall. They may also measure solar radiation, wind speed and relative humidity.

Other controllers, commonly called ET Controllers, use evapotranspiration data acquired either through the Internet, telephone or pager to estimate landscape water requirements, he said. Both ET and on-site sensor controllers use the data they receive to estimate evapotranspiration at the site and apply enough water to offset it.

Swanson and Dr. Guy Fipps, an AgriLife Extension engineer and director of the Irrigation Technology Center, tested both types of controllers over an eight-week period from early August through late September. ET controller bench tests were conducted in an indoor laboratory while an outdoor lab test was used for the controllers with on-site sensors.

Why the gross inaccuracy?

Part of the answer is that there are several methods to calculate evapotranspiration. Swanson and Fipps used the Standardized Penman-Monteith method, a model generally recognized as the gold standard. This method takes into account many factors, including solar radiation, Swanson said. Generally, methods that factor in solar radiation will be more accurate.

"From what I've been able to gather, some companies are tying into the (local) airport or weather stations that are posted online, because every city has an airport," Swanson said. "ET data calculated with **such weather data tends to be inaccurate.**"

Swanson noted that the units with on-site sensors did better in the tests than the ET controllers. The on-site sensor controllers applied on average about 70 percent less water than the ET controllers, and saved water compared to most manual applications.

Typically, manually controlled irrigation units on timers apply about twice as much water as needed, he said.

There are several possible causes for the over-irrigation, including improper ET values, high plant coefficients and insufficient accounting for rainfall.

The study is important because of the potential water savings by using smart



irrigation controllers, Swanson said. Several Texas cities are currently considering making smart controllers mandatory with the installation of new irrigation systems. For example, the city of Frisco now mandates smart controllers.

"If these controllers are to become requirements across the state, then it is important that they be evaluated formally under Texas conditions," Swanson said.

Swanson and Fipps noted in their formal report that although the smart irrigation controllers did over-water, they were potentially superior to manually controlled systems.

A copy of the report can be viewed on the Irrigation Technology Centers Web site at <http://ITC.tamu.edu>.

"The technology shows good promise but it definitely needs upgrading," Swanson said, adding that manufacturers are constantly updating their products.

"Two (manufacturers) have contacted us on what they can do to make their controller better," he said. "The others -- we're still waiting on a response." ♣

Sprinkler Check on Aisle 3

It's important to keep tabs on your sprinkler system. Age, weather, and changing landscapes can cause problems. Check your system twice a season, at a minimum, by following these steps.

Step 1. If you have the original irrigation system design, make a copy so you can make notes on it. If you do not have the original design, sketch the irrigation layout and number of sprinkler heads in each station. Number the heads on the sketch so you can make notes about each one.

Step 2. Run each station and observe each sprinkler head to see if it is running and distributing water properly, noting which ones are working correctly and which ones require attention.

Look for these problems:

Sprinkler heads spraying water onto the sidewalk, driveway, or road

Sprinkler heads missing, not operating, or having reduced water flow or poor distribution patterns

Sprinkler heads broken, gushing water out of the top, or not popping up

Sprinkler heads no longer straight up and down

Sprinkler heads that cause a cloud of mist

Grass, shrubbery, or trees blocking the distribution pattern

Step 3. Repair all problems yourself or hire a licensed irrigator. Most repairs require cleaning out a sprinkler head. After completing all repairs, run the system and time how long each station should run.

Step 4. Check for uniform distribution. Collect several empty, straight-sided cans such as cat food or tuna fish cans. Use a minimum of three cans per sprinkler head. Five cans per station are even better. Mark the inside of each can like a rain gauge with markings for ½ inch, ¾ inch, and 1 inch.

Step 5. Place the cans throughout one irrigation station.

Step 6. Run the first station for 15 minutes.

Step 7. Write down how much water is in each can. The ideal irrigation system distributes water uniformly in the area, and each can should have the same amount of water.



Step 8. Repeat these procedures for each station.

Step 9. Estimate the amount of water your landscape requires:

Turf areas in full sun on clay soil during the summer require about 1 inch of water every 5 –7 days.

Turf areas in full sun on sandy soil during the summer require about 1.5 inches of water every 5 –7 days.

Turf areas in full sun on clay soil during the winter require about 1 inch of water every 15–20 days.

Turf areas in full sun on sandy soil during the winter require about 1.5 inches of water every 15–20 days.

Shrub, groundcover, and perennial areas require about half the amount of water turf areas require if you keep 2-4 inches of mulch covering the root area.

Water plant containers and vegetable gardens as required.

Step 10. Do the math. You now know how many inches of water each station applies in 15 minutes. Set your controller according to how much time is necessary for each station to provide the estimated amount of water for the plants in that station. If you do not have an instruction manual for your controller, order one from the manufacturer either by telephone or on the Internet.

Step 11. Change the irrigation schedule each season. (Most controllers have an A and B schedule):

Spring: Use 20 percent less than the average summer schedule or as needed because the North Texas area usually receives a lot of rain in the spring.

Fall: Use 30 percent less than the average summer schedule or only as needed.

Winter: Turn off the controller and water only if there is no precipitation in a month.

Local, licensed irrigators and the City of McKinney have teamed up to offer residents discounted rates for irrigation checkups. For more information, visit www.BeaDribble.com

<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/GREENHOUSE/hortgardens/conservation/agentdemo1.pdf> 🌱

Winter time Birds

By Mary Means



The last few months of winter leave animals foraging for limited food, so this is a great time to supply extra food for our outdoor friends.

Suet cakes in wire racks are a good way to feed birds. Freeze the square cakes, then put them in the wire racks while frozen. That way they are not so messy. Hang them in a tree or on a pole to be enjoyed by woodpeckers, chickadees, titmice, and goldfinches.

Another good way to provide food for birds is with cylinder feeders. Some feeders have tiny slits in them for the food to come out. Fill these with thistle for goldfinches, purple finches, and pine siskins. Other cylinder feeders have larger openings. Fill these with black oil sunflower seeds and they will be visited by chickadees, titmice, and various finches.

If you put your birdseed out in your feeding spot late in the afternoon, it is less likely that it will all be eaten by house sparrow pests. There is a greater chance that the birdseed will provide a late dinner for native American sparrows such as white crowned sparrows, Harris sparrows, white throated sparrows, juncos and others. When these desirable birds arise early in the morning, they can enjoy a good breakfast before the house sparrows move in. A favorite seed of the native sparrows is white millet. It can be purchased at wildbird stores or sometimes at feed and seed stores.

Happy birding. 🌱

Home Vegetable Gardens Grow in Appeal

By Joseph Masabni, Assistant Professor and Agrilife Horticulturist, The Texas A&M System.

Home gardening continues to grow in popularity. One of every three families does some type of home gardening, according to conservative estimates, with most gardens located in urban areas. Texas gardeners can produce tasty, nutritious vegetables year-round. To be a successful gardener you will need to follow a few basic rules and make practical decisions.

Garden Site

Although many urban gardeners have little choice, selecting a garden site is extremely important. The ideal garden area gets full or nearly full sunlight and has deep, well-drained, fertile soil. The garden should be near a water outlet but not close to competing shrubs or trees. However, if you modify certain cultural practices and select the right crops, almost any site can become a highly productive garden.

Plant Selection

One of the first things you must do is decide what vegetables to grow. You will want to grow vegetables that return a good portion of nutritious food for the time and space they require. Vine crops such as watermelons, cantaloupes, winter squash and cucumbers need large amounts of space, but if you plant them near a fence or trellis you may need less space for vine crops. Plant the vegetables your family will enjoy most. Resist the urge to plant more of any particular vegetable than you need unless you plan to preserve the surplus.

It is important to select the right variety of each vegetable. If you plant the wrong variety for your area you may not get a satisfactory yield no matter how much care you give the plants. See <http://ccmgatx.org/Plants/Vegetables.asp> for recommendations for North Texas. If you try new varieties and hybrids, limit the size of the plantings. Most vegetables need full, all-day sun. If your garden does not receive full or nearly full sunlight, try growing leafy crops such as leaf lettuce, mustard and parsley.

Garden Plan

A gardener needs a plan just as an architect does. Careful planning lessens gardening work and increases the return on your labor. **Keep in mind maturity rates of the vegetables you'll be planting.** Long-term crops require a long growing period. Plant them where they won't interfere with the care and harvesting of short-term crops. Plant tall-growing crops (okra, staked toma-

toes, pole beans, sweet corn) on the north side of the garden where they will not shade or interfere with the growth of low-growing crops such as radishes, leaf lettuce, onions and bush beans.

Group crops according to their rate of maturity so a new crop can be planted to take the place of another as soon as it is removed. When you plant a new crop, it should be totally unrelated to the crop it is replacing. This is called crop rotation.

Soil Preparation

For detailed ideas, read our Amendments article on page one. In brief, be sure you add organic matter including expanded shale (soil conditioner) and turn it into the soil to a depth of 8 to 10 inches—the deeper the better. Please note that some advisories say to use sand, but this is not a good idea if you have clay soil. You will create cement!

Never work wet garden soil. To determine if the soil is dry enough for working, squeeze together a small handful of soil. If it sticks together in a ball and does not readily crumble under slight pressure by your thumb and finger, it is too wet for working.

Planting

Plant your garden as early as possible in the spring and fall so the vegetables will grow and mature during ideal conditions. Using transplants rather than seeds, when possible, allows crops to mature earlier and extends the productive period of many vegetable crops. Be careful not to plant transplants too deep or too shallow, especially if plants are in containers such as peat pots. Planting too deep often causes developed roots to abort. Planting too shallow may cause roots to dry out.

For recommended vegetable varieties, garden preparation instructions, ongoing maintenance details, harvest ideas and more, visit http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/publications/guides/E-502_home_vegetable_guide.pdf. 📄



Seed Starting

To get a jump on spring gardening, it's best to start seeds indoors so they'll be ready to transplant after our last average freeze date — March 17.

Select your seeds and pay close attention to the information on the back of the packet. Look at days to germination, start indoors dates, thinning information, and how to know when seedlings are ready to transplant. Plan backwards to determine the best seed start dates.

Use small, clean pots and dry potting soil. Soil-mixes are best. Soak the containers in water and tamp down the wet soil.

Place several seeds in each container, burying them at a depth that is roughly two times the size of the seed itself. Place your containers and seeds in a spot with moderate light - not in direct sunlight. Normal household light will be sufficient in most cases. Maintaining soil temperature of 80 to 85 degrees is best and can be done by putting garden heating mats under your containers. You may also want to cover your containers loosely with plastic wrap to keep the soil from drying out too quickly. Check your containers once or twice a day and mist them with warm water as needed.

Coming in Spring: Preparing for the Garden 🌱

From the Help Desk

Members of the Collin County Master Gardeners man a help desk for residents and their gardening / landscape questions. You can submit your own questions through our [online form](#), via email at Mgcollin@ag.tamu.edu, or by calling (972) 548-4232 or Metro (972) 424-1460, x 4232. Read on for a compilation of recent questions that have come across our desk.



Q: What are good trees for the Collin County area?

A: Referred resident to the Aggie website's [Texas native tree database](#) for information. Also discussed [Texas Super Star](#) selections such as Shantung Maple, Lacey Oak, Chinese Pistache, and Chinkapin Oak .



Q: How do you transplant Eastern Red Cedars that have sprouted naturally but we want to move to another site?

A: Choose small trees to transplant, dig carefully and try to get as much of the root system as possible, dig a hole deep enough to accommodate the roots, make sure the base of the tree will be at the same soil level as it was previously, and backfill the hole with native soil. Mulch well.

Q: How do you winterize citrus and banana trees?

A: This should be done in late fall. Mark your calendar for next year: For the banana, wrap as much of the stalk as possible in burlap. For the citrus tree, if it is not in a pot that can be moved indoors, wrap the trunk and major branches in burlap. Mulch the soil asap on top of the plants. At this point in our season, just start watching for sprouts from the banana tree in the spring. You can cut off the dead leaves and stalks in early spring or late winter. The citrus may not survive, no matter what you do.

Q: Is it more effective to grow herbs in plastic or clay pots?

A: Some great information is available in the book, *Herbs in the Garden*, by Mr. Wolman. Specifically, both clay and terracotta have traditionally been favored for herb gardens. They drain well and are attractive, but can dry out quickly during hot weather and may crack during a freeze. Plastic is lightweight and may not be **sturdy enough to hold up a large, fully grown herb.** However, it's largely a matter of preference.



Q: What is a good time of year to remove groundcover? Also, I hate to throw away plants but don't want my ivy anymore. Any suggestions?

A: **Late fall is the best time to relocate bushes, groundcovers, and more.** Since you don't want the ivy anyway, you can dig it up and offer it to friends and neighbors. Just keep it in a sheltered spot until you can off-load the plants. Also, you can post plant giveaways (and almost any other free giveaways) through www.freecycle.org. Master Gardeners and gardening clubs also often have members that want pass-along plants. 🌱

Prune Those Roses

Dr. Doug Welsh, Landscape Horticulturist,
Texas AgriLife Extension Service,
Texas A&M University

February is the month when most modern roses need to be pruned. Even if your roses have already begun growth, the time has come to prune. Annual heavy pruning is essential to insure the prolific bloom and long-life of a rose bush.

Explaining the concept of rose pruning without a live bush to demonstrate on is difficult, so let your mind loose to help visualize the following steps in rose pruning:

- Pruning of roses is actually done year round. Every time you cut off old blooms and remove twiggy growth, you are actually promoting new growth. There are two times a year when you prune more seriously, spring and fall.
- You will need the following items: a good pair of hand pruners (preferably the scissor type, not anvil type), a sharp keyhole saw and large loppers, a heavy pair of leather gloves, a pruning compound and a dull knife.
- The first step in spring pruning of Hybrid Teas, Grandifloras, Floribundas and Climbing roses is to remove any canes that are dead or just old and non-productive.
- These canes are usually gray in color and scaly.
- This pruning will encourage future "basal" breaks which are the life blood of any rose bush. Basal breaks refer to new shoots, soon to be producing canes, which arise from the graft union. These should not be confused with "suckers" which arise from the rootstock below the graft union. Remove all suckers.
- The next step involves taking a good look at the bud union. If you have any old, dry, scaly wood on the union, remove it. Use the dull knife to scrape the bud union to remove the scaly wood. By doing this it will again make it possible for new basal breaks to come about.
- Beginning to fine tune the pruning, remove all twiggy growth on the remaining canes (note: the fine tune pruning on climbing roses should be done after they



bloom in the spring). Try to clean out the middle of the bush as much as possible. This allows for good air circulation to prevent insects and disease.

- Now you are ready to prune on the good healthy canes. If your roses have already flushed growth, it is important to prune each cane back to a dormant bud. A bud that has already begun growth and is then pruned will simply continue to grow vigorously and bloom very little. A dormant, non-growing bud will initiate growth after pruning and will produce an abundance of blooms.
- One comment used to describe pruning is to "prune to an outside bud." This means when picking the point on a given cane to cut back to, make sure there is a good bud on the cane facing toward the outside of the plant.

(Continued on page 9)

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We're on the Web!
<http://ccmgatx.org/>
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Extension programs serve people of all ages regardless of socioeconomic level, race, color, sex, religion, disability, or nation origin. The Texas A&M University System, U. S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Courts of Texas Co-operating.

Rose Pruning (Continued)

(Continued from page 8)

This will insure the growth of the new bud is to the outside, therefore keeping the center of the rose bush clear and open for air circulation.

- Another guideline in pruning back an individual cane is to cut the cane at the point when the diameter of the cane is the size of a pencil or slightly larger. This is normally at a height of 18 to 14 inches. If there is the need to prune back to a dormant bud, the size of the cane may be larger and the cane length may be shorter.
- If old and large canes have been removed to the bud union, it is a good practice to seal these large cuts. This helps prevent insects and diseases from infecting the cuts. Smaller canes usually don't need to be sealed. Use some sort of sealing compound such as orange shellac or even Elmer's glue.

When pruning is completed, remove any old foliage left on the canes and rake up and remove any leaves or twigs. This will help reduce the disease and insect pressure on the young, tender shoots and buds.

The final product of your pruning should be a rose bush about 18 to 24 inches tall with 4 to 8 canes. Add some fertilizer, water and tender-loving-care, and that pitiful looking rose bush will soon give you a shower of flowers.



Q. What about pruning miniature roses? When and how?

A. Miniatures should be pruned now, too. As for how to prune, use the same guidelines given for the larger type roses except do it in miniature. The end product will be a rose bush about 4 to 6 inches tall with 4 to 6 canes.

If you don't have any miniature roses, plant some this spring. You will be surprised at the wealth of blooms such a small plant can produce.

Use the miniatures in groups of threes, fives, or sevens to make a real splash. The miniatures also work well as a border plant along the front of a shrub bed. And finally, try some miniatures in clay pots and decorative containers to add color to decks, patios and apartment balconies. †