Rethinking Roses

By Christina Muller, Master Gardener

I'd like to plant roses but aren't they too much trouble? Arthur, Oceano

Many gardeners believe that roses require a lot of water and regular herbicide applications to stay healthy but in fact, many roses are very tough plants. Wild roses occur throughout the Northern Hemisphere, from the Arctic Circle to the Mojave Desert.   If suitable varieties are chosen, they can thrive in gardens with little effort.

Roses come in many forms and can fill a number of different roles. A row of thorny roses can become a privacy barrier and provide nesting habitat for birds. A shrub can be a showy focal point with fragrant flowers lasting months. A large rambler can block an unfortunate view; while a climber can adorn an arbor or trellis.

On the coast, roses can fall prey to rust, mildew, and other diseases due to the humidity. Look for resistant varieties among modern roses, but don't forget wild rose species and Old Garden Roses (OGRs). Many Chinas and Noisettes thrive in such conditions; some will flower nearly continuously in mild climates.

Hot, dry summers further inland mean less concern with disease and more concern with water conservation. Mulch will keep roots cool and slow moisture loss. Gardeners might also look to 'found' roses - those OGRs that have survived at abandoned homes and neglected cemeteries. One such rose is Harison's Yellow, a fragrant climber known variously as the Oregon Trail Rose, Logtown Rose, Pioneer Rose and the Yellow Rose of Texas. It started as a chance seedling, was propagated and sold by a Long Island nursery, and then traveled west with settlers. It lives on in many areas of the west with no care at all.

Wildlife and native gardeners may wish to grow roses native to California and San Luis Obispo County, in particular. Most have sharp thorns, grow in thickets and will withstand some drought. Flowers are singular in shades of pink and most are fragrant. The hips which form in the fall will be enjoyed by birds and other wildlife.