

JACK AND THE BEAN STALK
The Art of Fortuniana
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Thanks to Bob Martin for asking me to write this article. I greatly appreciate his confidence. First, let me start with a disclaimer. I live in Central Florida. This is where I grow and show my roses and if there is one thing I have learned in the last ten years it is that growing roses here is quite different than other parts of the country. Florida is filled with retired rosarians from up north who find our growing conditions quite a challenge using their old rules.

Secondly, I can't write an article about growing on rosa fortuniana without saying how lucky I am to call as my friends, Jim and Diann Giles, now retired, of Giles Roses in Davenport, Florida. Jim and Diann are, in my opinion, the leading experts in the world on growing roses on fortuniana rootstock. This was proven to me time and time again along my rose journey. When Jim Giles tells you something about fortuniana roses, it's right, always right, period, end of the story. I have benefited greatly from their knowledge.

I think the first thing that struck me as odd was back in the fall of 1997 when I was attending the ARS National Convention in Shreveport and I had for the first time a chance to talk to famous rosarians from around the country. Generally, the topic of how many roses do you grow would come up. Most in attendance grew 400 to 600 plants, a few slightly less, but all had way more than my paltry 165 hybrid teas. Good God! How do they do it? I was 42 years old at the time. I was killing myself in the garden. How do these people do it?

At a program later that day I heard Howard Walters say he was using about 7 to 10 gallons of spray material to do his several hundred roses and that he was spritzing the top of each plant. Excuse me, I use 75 gallons of spray material and no way can I reach the top of my roses to spritz them! Something did not make sense.

Later in the convention Louise Coleman was graciously showing me a picture of her garden in New York, which had about 450 roses neatly packed together in tight rows. The garden and the roses were beautiful. I asked her how closely they were planted to each other? She answered about 24 inches! Bingo! The light came on. My roses are planted on six to eight foot centers and the rows are at least that far apart. By July you can't walk among the roses without shredding your clothing. Welcome to the world of rosa fortuniana! Size XXL.

So how big do roses on fortuniana actually get? Well of course it depends on the variety but I think I can say without exception that I don't know. I find it necessary to prune them way before they stop growing so they don't fall over or break off major canes. Remember that here in Florida our roses really never stop growing and they never ever go into dormancy. A hybrid tea such as Louise Estes can easily reach 8' X 8' in as little as four months after spring pruning. I have Prosperity over an arch and along a fence that easily reaches 20 feet long by mid summer.

But is bigger better? Are the blooms and stems of a fortuniana rose bush superior to those of other rootstocks? Well, let me say that in Florida the answer is clearly yes. Under the proper conditions and the proper care a hybrid tea can be as magnificent here as anywhere in the world. The only limiting factor for bloom size is the fact that our average temperatures are slightly higher than say the northwest. Our stems are second to none. A properly balanced fortuniana rootstock rose with plenty of leaves and proper nutrition is a powerful plant capable of producing magnificent roses in cooler weather.

Will this work for you? Well, let's establish a few rosa fortuniana rules and see if we can arrive at that answer.

First, let's discuss the roots of rosa fortuniana. You know the actual plant roots themselves. I mean isn't the reason we choose a rootstock for the roots and their genetics. I think yes.

The roots of rosa fortuniana grow straight out along the soil surface or maybe down six to ten inches. There is not a taproot of any kind. This growth habit is reportedly the limiting factor for this rootstock in very cold climates. But as I said in the beginning, I only grow roses here in Florida so I really don't know if that information is true.

In digging up Hybrid Teas that have been in my garden for a few years I can certainly attest that the roots can easily reach out ten feet in either direction. That's a twenty-foot circle and that's big. Many times Central Florida Rosarians complain that their roses are damaged by applications of lawn fertilizer containing the weed killer Atrazine. What is really happening of course is that the roots have outgrown the bed and are well into the yard and yes, this can be a problem. I use this example to illustrate how far these roots can reach. By understanding the growth habit of fortuniana we can limit this exposure by careful plant placement.

Once we understand exactly how far these roots can really go, then we can easily come to the conclusion that when growing on fortuniana, rose beds are far superior to rose holes or pots. If you want your rose roots to support a healthy top growth then give them plenty of good soil and room. This would require a fully amended and tilled rose bed and I believe this approach is quite superior to other methods for success with fortuniana.

If we accept the fact fortuniana performs at its best when grown in a fully amended bed, logically then, it would follow that your fertilization program should follow the same rules. Feed the bed and the plants will be fine. My rose garden is about 10,000 square feet and all of it is an amended bed. I regularly use my rotary fertilizer spreader to apply so-po-mag and gypsum to the entire bed as calcium, potassium, and sulfur are in short supply in our Florida soils. My roses respond quite positively to this program of putting the nutrients where the roots are, which is everywhere.

As part of my organic feeding program I do maintain a large donut of compost and other material around each bush. It is in this area where you will regularly find thousands of tiny white feeder roots from the fortuniana reaching up for the nutrients. To me this is a sign that the roots are quite happy.

So let's talk about pruning. Do you prune fortuniana differently than other root stocks. You bet, hugely differently, no pun intended.

First let's remember where I live, in Central Florida where it rarely gets into the thirties and almost never freezes. So my roses are sailing along during the winter. In fact, the winter is our growing season! From November 1st to April 30th our roses can be fantastic. But remember that they are not in dormancy, not even close. So what, in my opinion is the proper way to prune roses grown on fortuniana? Leave the leaves on the plant and as many as possible.

My spring pruning is very similar to what most northern growers do in the fall. Clean out the center of the bush and take about a third off the top, maybe a little more. But leave on as many leaves as possible. Thank you Jim Giles, that was the greatest piece of advice you ever gave me.

Do you want to start a great debate? Go to a rose society in Florida and bring up the topic of removing or maintaining your leaves during spring pruning. Holy cow will the opinions come out. People go crazy over this topic claiming more disease and more pests from trying to maintain their leaves over the winter. But they forget, the fortuniana needs the leaves, it must have the leaves and those who remove them are setting their roses back at THE MOST important time of the year. Right before the spring shows, right when our temperatures are perfect.

Fortuniana rose bushes cannot generate powerful rose stems without the chlorophyll in the leaves for energy. The benefits of dormancy are not present, at least not here in Central Florida. With the leaves on, there is no blind growth and a faster and more powerful growth cycle toward the shows. In my opinion show results are confirming this phenomenon. These are Mother Natures Laws, not mine.

So what other crazy stuff do you do with fortuniana roses in Florida? Okay, how about this. On or about July 15th I cut about thirty five percent off the top of my big roses. I whack them right down when it's 90 degrees, not because I want to but because I have to. They hate it and they go into a funk for a while, but if I don't do it then they will grow to ten feet tall and begin to fall over and break off stems despite numerous rebar stakes. By cutting them so hard in the summer I am able to maintain a reasonable bush shape and structure going into the fall shows and this also helps with prevention of blackspot during our late summer rainy season. Simply said, I would rather stress the plant when there are no shows rather than when there are. My show roses are clearly better because of that strategy.

So really, I prune my fortuniana roses three times a year. Spring, Summer and Fall, but lightly each time. Controlling the monster is necessary!

Periodically in Florida a rose is introduced to the general public that we are initially unable to get on rosa fortuniana. Being an avid exhibitor I am happy to get this new variety on any rootstock I can get and have planted most of the regularly used commercial rootstocks in my garden. The performance is not even close. Perhaps the other rootstocks can keep up for about six months but then the gap widens greatly.

Miniature roses on fortuniana are a topic all to themselves. You could write an entire book on that subject alone. I grow only a few dozen minis but I can tell you that the wonderful "Fairhope" is a queen machine on fortuniana and I have struggled with it on it's own root.

One final point about growing roses on fortuniana, I believe, but cannot prove, that this rootstock likes to be on the dry side as far as its soil is concerned. Now I did not say dried out, simply that fortuniana clearly does not like to be really wet and less than excellent results are possible under these conditions.

So is bigger better? Is fortuniana a superior rootstock? For the south absolutely YES! For Mid America give it a go and insulate the roots with a thick layer of mulch in the fall and let me know the results.

Remember that fortuniana is genetically big. It wants to grow large to be happy and powerful and that in all locations it needs leaves to do that. Stripping the leaves will set it back.

Because of its size you will have to prune it regularly, but remember to prune it lightly. Never cut it way down as this can even cause it to die. I believe heavy pruning is responsible for most dissatisfaction with rosa fortuniana.

Give this rootstock a try, but remember to warn your neighbors. Like Jack and The Bean Stalk these magic beans can grow to the sky!