Rose Rosette Disease

Introduction

Rose rosette disease (RRD) was first identified in the 1940s in the Rocky Mountains. *Rosa* species and hybrids are the only known hosts for the disease. *Multiflora rose* (*Rosa multiflora*) is a common wild host of RRD and the disease has spread throughout much of the U.S. on multiflora and other wild roses. The disease has been found in cultivated roses in Oklahoma and in many other states including Missouri, Arkansas and Texas. There is no cure for RRD and symptomatic roses should be destroyed. Despite challenges, roses are irreplaceable and should continue to be used in landscape plantings.

Symptoms

The symptoms of RRD are variable, depending on the cultivar of rose (Table 1). In the early stages, plants may display one or several elongated stems that may have unusual red or yellow color (Figure 1). It is important to note that many rose cultivars have normal red color on new growth, so this should not be confused with RRD (Figure 2). With time, normal new growth will develop a green leaf color, while foliage damaged by the disease will remain discolored and distorted (Figure 3). RRD-infected shoots may be more succulent and pliable than normal rose stems. Excessive prickles (thorns) may form, which are initially soft and pliable and later may harden (Figure 4).

A common RRD symptom is a brush-like cluster of shoots or branches that originate at or near the same point, a symptom that is called a witches’ broom or rosette (Figure 5). Leaves within the witches’ broom may be stunted, distorted and pigmented red or yellow. Symptoms of witches’ broom, leaf discoloration, and/or distortion are often visible on one branch or more, and later may spread randomly across the entire plant (Figure 6). The flowers may be distorted, mottled or blighted and fail to open fully (Figure 7). Severely infected plants may not produce flowers. On some cultivars, new shoots with RRD are often thicker and more succulent than the cane from which they originate (Figure 8). Defoliation and dieback are common with RRD and in severe cases, rose plants will die in two to three seasons. RRD infected roses have reduced winter hardiness and are more likely to be damaged in cold winters. Growers often remove the plants prior to death because RRD-infected roses are no longer visually appealing (Figure 9).

Plants with RRD are under stress and weaker than healthy plants. Stressed roses are more susceptible to other diseases such as black spot and powdery mildew. For information about other rose diseases, see Extension Fact Sheet EPP-7607 “Diseases of Roses.”

Symptoms of RRD may resemble injury from herbicides. Glyphosate is the active ingredient in the commonly used herbicide Round-up®. If glyphosate makes contact with rose foliage in late summer or fall, the plants may show damage immediately or the chemical may be stored in the buds. In the latter case, damage becomes evident when buds swell and leaves emerge the following spring. Glyphosate can cause a witches’ broom symptom on roses, as well as stunted, narrow leaves (Figure 10). However, excessive thorniness and unusual red pigmentation do not usually occur with glyphosate. The herbicide 2,4-D is a product commonly applied to lawns in Oklahoma for broad-leaf weed control. This product can also cause leaf distortion on roses. Herbicide injury is non-selective, so other plants in the area may also show unusual symptoms.

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Table 1. Snapshot of RRD symptoms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elongated shoots</th>
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<tr>
<td>Red or yellow leaf mottle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leaf distortion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Excess prickles (thorns)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Succulent, thickened stems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Witches’ broom (rosette)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flower distortion, discoloration or blight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Branch dieback</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduced winter hardiness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased susceptibility to other diseases</td>
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Figure 1. Rose rosette disease (RRD) causes elongated rose shoots, leaf distortion and an unusual red or yellow mottle of the leaves.

Figure 2. Normal new growth on many roses is red. This should not be confused with symptoms of RRD.

Figure 3. The healthy new growth on this rose has developed into dark green foliage with normal flowers. The section at top center is affected by RRD and continues to show leaf distortion, discoloration and may fail to flower.

Figure 4. An excessive number of prickles (thorns) on shoots is a symptom of RRD.
Figure 5. RRD causes rose shoots to have a cluster of shoots emerging from nearly the same point on the stem resulting in a witches’ broom (rosette) appearance.

Figure 6. One portion of this rose (bottom left) shows witches’ broom and leaf discoloration caused by RRD.

Figure 7. Blooms may show discoloration, mottled color or fail to open normally.

Disease Cycle
The disease is caused by a plant virus, the rose rosette virus (RRV). This virus cannot be transmitted by sap; it is only transmitted by grafting or eriophyid mites, *Phyllocoptes fructiphilus*. This mite is microscopic and tends to hide in buds, at the base of shoots, leaf axils or under leaf scars (Figure 11). The mite acquires RRV when it feeds on infected plants. The disease is transmitted when an infective mite vector feeds on the plant. A few weeks to months after infection, plants will begin to show symptoms of RRD. The mites crawl short distances on rose plants, but they can be carried further distances by wind currents, blowing to new roses. Infective mites can also be carried to new sites on gloves, clothing and tools. Both the mite and virus are specific to roses (*Rosa* spp.). No other hosts have been identified. The mites survive the winter by hiding near or within buds, leaf axils or leaf scars. The virus may be inactive during the winter, but symptoms will appear on new growth emerging in the spring.
Figure 8. On a normal cane (left), the new shoot has a smaller diameter than the older growth. RRD may cause a thickening of the stem (right), so the newer growth is thicker and more succulent than older growth.

Figure 9. Diseased roses should be removed, since they harbor the virus and the mite. Often, the plants are not removed until they are visually unappealing.

Figure 10. Damage to a landscape rose from the herbicide glyphosate.
Management

Management of RRD is a multistep approach and uses integrated pest management (Table 2). All landscape roses are susceptible to RRV. There is no cure once a plant is infected. Growers have attempted to remove symptomatic canes by pruning. This can be effective, but requires vigilant scouting of plants. However, pruning is not always effective because the microscopic mites may remain on the plant and/or recently infected canes, which may not exhibit symptoms for many months. If symptomatic shoots continue to appear, then the entire plant should be removed from the landscape. Maintaining proper health and vigor of roses in the landscape may be helpful.

Miticides to control mite vectors are not recommended for home gardeners because most available miticides are effective for spider mites, and may not control the eriophyid mite that transmits RRV. In areas where RRD has been a problem, roses should be heavily pruned in late winter or early spring before new buds break. Do not prune too early or winter injury may occur. Debris should be removed by hand and a leaf blower should not be employed since this may blow mites onto other roses in the area. Foliage should be discarded in the trash. Since the mites overwinter primarily near buds and leaf scars, many mites will be removed by heavy pruning. Following winter pruning, plants should be treated with dormant oil to reduce the population of remaining mites. Monthly applications of horticultural oil also may help reduce mite populations.

Research at this time suggests that the virus does not contaminate the soil like some other pathogens if infected roses are removed from a site. The mites will die in about a day in the absence of a host. However, they can survive on fallen debris. It is critical that all foliar material is removed and destroyed before replanting, especially fallen leaves and buds. The mites may also blow to other roses in the area, both cultivated and wild roses. If these roses harbor the mites or the virus, it is likely a replacement planting will become infected in the future. Therefore, wild roses such as multiflora rose should be removed, since these plants can harbor the virus and/or the mites. Other cultivated roses in the area should be scouted and removed of symptoms.

When installing new roses, carefully inspect all plants, ensuring they are healthy and free of pest and disease symptoms, including those of RRD. Use proper spacing between plants and do not crowd roses. Mites are more likely to crawl from plant to plant if packed closely together.

It is helpful to install a mixed planting using some non-rose material to reduce disease spread. Since Rosa species and hybrids are the only known hosts, mixed plantings interfere with the disease cycle and slow the spread of disease (Figure 12).

Plants should be monitored throughout the season for symptoms of RRD. If diseased plants are replaced, a new infection may develop if other roses in the area are infected with RRV. Therefore, successful management is best when entire neighborhoods or communities are educated to recognize the disease and act quickly to remove symptomatic plants.

Table 2. Management guidelines for RRD.

1. Remove symptomatic shoots by pruning.
2. Discard all diseased foliage immediately in the trash.
3. If symptomatic shoots continue to appear, remove the plant.
4. If RRD was present the previous year, heavily prune in late winter.
5. Discard all pruned foliage in the trash since it may harbor mites.
6. Follow dormant pruning with an application of dormant oil.
7. Treat monthly with horticultural oil. Discontinue use during high temperature periods as indicated on the product label.
8. Scout and remove wild roses in the area.
9. Scout landscape roses in the area and follow these guidelines if symptoms are present on plants in the area.
10. Do not use leaf blowers near roses.
11. For new installations, do not overcrowd plantings. Use proper spacing.
12. Consider mixed plantings (roses with non-rose plants) to break the disease cycle.
13. Promote health and vigor by irrigating during periods of drought, maintaining fertility and controlling fungal diseases.
Stressed plants are more likely to become diseased. Promote health and vigor of roses by irrigating during periods of drought, maintain proper fertility with soil tests and control fungal diseases.

**Diagnosis of RRD**

When RRD is suspected, the plant(s) should be examined for the presence of eriophyid mites. The mites are too small to be seen in the landscape and examination requires a trained individual with a high powered microscope. Therefore, clients should cut symptomatic shoots (preferably shoots with flower buds) that measure 6 inches to 12 inches long. Wrap the shoots in newspaper, and place them in a sealed plastic bag. If the sample is not going to be delivered immediately, it should be stored in the refrigerator. Samples can be taken to the local county Extension office. They will send them to a specialist for examination. Digital images are always helpful, since they may provide other clues about the problem when eriophyid mites are not detected. If the plants are symptomatic and eriophyid mites are present, the problem is most likely rose rosette disease. Due to the high cost of virus testing, the Plant Disease and Insect Diagnostic Laboratory does not test all plants for the RRV. However, the lab will test to rule out RRV when chemical injury is suspected or if the virus appears in new areas of the state.
Suggestions for Roses in the Landscape

1. Interplant roses with other non-rose species whenever practical and aesthetically pleasing.

2. Visually scout roses for RRD symptoms monthly during the growing season.

3. Immediately remove affected stems, if not the entire plant, whenever symptoms are observed.

4. Pruning in winter is warranted on an annual basis.

5. Always work with healthy roses first and RRD-suspect or infected roses last. This will prevent the mites from being spread to healthy plants on skin, tools, gloves, clothing and other equipment.

6. Familiarize the surroundings and eliminate carriers (*Rosa multiflora*) when possible.

7. Educate neighbors to follow these guidelines and take action as needed.

8. Roses are irreplaceable and should continue to be grown throughout Oklahoma without hesitation.
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