

432eWhy Didn't Some of My Flowering Shrubs Bloom?

By Susan Camp

Jim and I returned a few days ago from a whirlwind trip to San Diego to visit our son, Joe, who has just returned to that beautiful city after a year-long assignment with the Coast Guard in Bahrain. The weather was gorgeous; the food was fantastic; and the company was superb. Yet I couldn't wait to get back home. I was worried about the front garden.

April, May, and June were lovely this year; the daffodils and tulips put on a show, and the spring-blooming flowers performed exactly the way they should have. Since then, I have been disappointed in the flowering of some of my perennial shrubs. I am not counting the daylily and azalea blossoms that were raided by our Gang of Seven deer; the depredation of those plants was not unexpected.

I was disappointed that my Old Garden Roses produced so few blossoms, especially since all but one, Autumn Damask, bloom only once a year. The others, including the Apothecary's Rose and Rosa Mundi, also performed poorly; both of these lovely shrubs normally fill the garden with color and fragrance for a couple of weeks, but not this year. My peonies faded and dropped their petals, too. 'Sarah Bernhardt' and 'Shirley Temple' were the only two cultivars that kept their petals more than a couple of days.

What went wrong? The roses and peonies are established plants. Some of the peonies were planted by the previous owners, so I can rule out planting in the wrong location and planting at the wrong depth, two factors that can affect the success of blooming.

The amount of sunlight a plant receives plays a big role in flower production. Most roses thrive in full sunlight, although some cultivars appreciate shelter from afternoon sun. Peonies like sunshine, too, but this spring moved into summer very quickly with temperatures rising into the 90's early in June with high humidity, as well.

Rainfall, either too little or too much, affects blooming. In late spring and early summer, we received massive amounts of rain in short periods of time, interspersed with stretches of dry days when irrigation was necessary. Too much water can waterlog plant roots and even cause root rot. It is tempting to water plants heavily during dry periods, but it is important to let soil dry to a depth of one inch before you reach for the hose.

Improper pruning and poor air circulation can affect blooming. Find out whether your shrubs bloom on old or new wood or both. Prune shrubs that bloom on new wood as soon as they finish blooming. Shrubs that bloom on old wood should be pruned in late winter or early spring. Some shrubs are rebloomers and produce flowers more than once a season, making pruning a little bit tricky. If your shrubs are very dense, you may need to prune out some inner stems to provide better air circulation.

Diseases and insect pests can damage both new and well-established plants. If you notice the effects of insect infestation or disease, take action right away using environmentally safe products. If you aren't sure how to handle the problem, you can contact a Master Gardener through the Gloucester Extension Office at (804) 693-2602.

Nutrient-rich soil is necessary for healthy plants to thrive and produce flowers. Our local soil is a notoriously poor combination of sand and clay with low nutritional content. The annual addition of organic material will gradually increase the health of your soil, but soil testing every three years will help ensure that nitrogen (N), phosphorous (P), and potassium (K) levels are maintained at appropriate levels. You can obtain a soil test kit from the Gloucester Extension Office.

Too much nitrogen produces green leaves, but few flowers, so my first step is a soil test to find out if the NPK levels in my garden currently provide the nutrients that my roses and peonies need to produce healthy, long-lasting flowers.