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The single most popular garden flower currently sold in the United States is of course the rose. Today, there are more than 6,000 entirely different varieties in almost any conceivable color, form, fragrance, and bloom period with more varieties being developed each year.

It is true that roses can be used as individual specimen plants in the landscape, as mass plantings for high impact areas of your landscape, or even as borders, hedges, or trellises. Each year, however, during February it is their appeal as cut flowers that make them so popular for presenting to that special person for Valentine's Day.

There are many legends as to how Valentine's Day originated. My favorite has its origins in third century Rome. According to legend, the Emperor Claudius II (Claudius "The Cruel") as he was called was involved in many unpopular and deadly military conflicts. He was having trouble recruiting strong young men whom he considered to be the best potential soldiers to join the military. He therefore cancelled all marriages and engagements in Rome.

Saint Valentine who was a priest in Rome defied this order and continued to perform marriages in secret. When Claudius found out he had St. Valentine jailed and scheduled to be executed. It was in jail where St. Valentine fell in love with a young woman, believed to be the jailer's daughter. Before his death on February 14, the legend states that he wrote his beloved a letter and signed it simply "From Your Valentine".

Whether you believe in legends or not, one thing is for certain and that is that time is growing short to get yourself on the list (and out of the doghouse) for Valentine's Day roses or other flowers of your choosing.

Once you have redeemed yourself and purchased your cut flowers or roses, here are a few tips for getting the longest possible enjoyment out of them. All cut flowers have a very limited life. Prepare your vase by adding a measured amount of pre-packaged floral food into luke-warm not cold water. If your flowers did not come with a pre-packaged pack of the material be sure that you ask your florist or retailer for one. Mix the material according to the directions since too much or too little can reduce the life of your cut flowers.

Cut (or re-cut) the stems of your roses at a 45 degree angle about an inch or so from the bottom of the stem. Hold the stems under water as you make your cuts. There is actually some debate as to whether this tip actually increases the life of your roses; however, it is simple and doesn't cost anything so it definitely will not hurt. Do not submerge the entire rose, only the bottom portion of the stem.

Display your roses in a cool, draft-free location that is out of direct sunlight. If possible you can even move your arrangement to a cool location such as an unheated room, basement, or breezeway overnight. Many people ask if it is ok to store them temporarily in the refrigerator to prolong their life. This will work for short periods of time; however, do not store them in a refrigerator that contains fruit because the ethylene gas produced by ripening fruit actually accelerates the maturity and degeneration of your flowers.

Keep your arrangement watered using the extra preservative solution that you mixed up when you purchased the roses. If you did not keep the excess, then you can use room temperature distilled water. Tap water will work in a pinch but your flowers will usually stay fresher longer by using distilled water. If your roses develop bent necks you can try submerging the stems including the flower in luke-warm water in a flat pan. This may help to at least temporarily revive them.

A floral arrangement can be a suitable substitute for the traditional cut roses. Please note that I am in no position to make this determination for you, so you are on your own with this decision. A mixed bouquet of red-pink-white colors and can be accomplished with mixtures of carnations, daisies, freesia, and even tulips. There are even some more exotic choices including alstromeria, red anthurium, or even ginger. A sprinkling of tiny white baby's breath should round out your arrangement quite nicely.

If a dozen cut roses or bouquets of cut flowers just aren't your thing, then there are several alternatives that you might consider. You might consider purchasing a potted rose that can be transplanted out into your landscape. There are many new "All America Selections" in which to choose that will work great in our area. You can even consider a gift card to your favorite garden center that will allow the person you are purchasing for to choose their own potted rose.

Many florists and plant outlets now carry potted plants such as tulips, azaleas, chrysanthemums, and others with the Valentine shopper in mind (or at least those of us who put off getting in our rose order until it was too late). A good quality house plant such as African Violets (some varieties even

come with reddish blooms) also makes a good choice. Thank goodness for this service!

Keep your potted plants watered, but do not overwater them. Most prefer temperatures from 65-70 degrees during the day and around 50 – 55 degrees at night. It is important to remove any foil, plastic, or paper from around your potted plant since these materials can prevent the drainage of excess moisture from the pot.

Whether your final choice is cut roses, floral arrangements, potted plants, or even the ever popular gift card; the most important thing is not to forget that special person on Valentines Day. Remember the doghouse reference earlier....enough said. A simple and inexpensive potted plant or arrangement also makes a nice gift for Mom or even an elderly neighbor on Valentine's Day. After all the real purpose of the holiday is to brighten someone's day and what better way to do it than with flowers!