The Value of Alfalfa
By: Gary Rankin

My first memory of the word "alfalfa" will probably date me, since the first alfalfa that I remember was "Alfalfa" from the "Spanky and Our Gang" comedies. Alfalfa was a tall and lanky youngster with a freckled face and a wisp of hair that stood straight up at the back of his head. He was not too bright and his pants were too short, but his heart was usually in the right place. When we started growing roses in the 1990s, I learned about the other alfalfa - the food for rabbits and roses.

Alfalfa (Medicago sativa) is a member of the pea or legume family and is native to western Asia and eastern Mediterranean regions. The first record of alfalfa was in a book written by the Emperor of China in 2939 BC. The Greeks cultivated alfalfa starting around 500 BC for animal food and for some medicinal applications. Arab tribes named the plant "alfalfa", which means "father of all foods". Now alfalfa is widely grown and provides an important food source for many animals including horses, cows, rabbits and other domestic animals.

Why is alfalfa good for roses? As a fertilizer, alfalfa is 5-1-2, providing a good source of nitrogen, calcium, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, zinc, vitamins (A, D, B1, B6, E, K and U) and triaconatol, which is a fatty acid growth stimulant. Because of these beneficial components, alfalfa can provide roses many of the substances that they need to grow as well as stimulating growth.

Alfalfa can be used in many ways. Alfalfa meal can be worked into the soil around rose bushes. Normally one cupful per large rose bush and about one-half cup for miniatures is recommended. Alfalfa meal is also contained in many commercial organic products (e.g. Mills Magic Mix) because of its beneficial components. Alfalfa pellets can be used instead of the meal by again working the pellets into the soil around roses. The pellets will soon break down with watering or by rain to slowly release the trace minerals, triaconatol, and other important nutrients. Alfalfa pellets come in many sizes, depending on the animal for which they were intended. Alfalfa pellets for horse feed are much larger than similar pellets for rabbits. I usually buy pelleted rabbit feed that contains alfalfa for this purpose, as well as for making "tea".

Alfalfa "tea" is another good way to provide the nutrients contained in alfalfa to the rose bush. In essence, by making a "tea" you are extracting the nutrients from the alfalfa product (meal or pellet) with water, much as you extract your tea bag to make a cup of Earl Grey or Constant Comment. To make alfalfa tea, put about eight to ten cups of alfalfa meal or pellets into a 30 gallon plastic garbage can, almost fill the can with water, cover and let bake in the sun for three to five days. Stir daily to make sure that the extraction process is well underway and to disperse any organic matter that has risen to the top of the water.

Eventually, the water extract will take on an orange color and the fibrous organic material will settle on the bottom of the garbage can. Now you are almost ready to give the roses a drink of your "tea". Since I usually make alfalfa tea in the early and late summer, the water often gets very hot in the covered garbage can. For that reason, I try to put out the tea early in the morning.
But if I have to put out the tea after work, then filling the garbage can to near the top with the cool water from the hydrant helps cool down the tea and prevents damaging tender roots. I learned this lesson the hard way, by filling the garbage can up all the way at the beginning and burning some roots on my bushes when I applied the tea in the late afternoon without adding cooler water first. Now, I always leave room to add 5 or more gallons of fresh water to fill the can and cool the contents before applying morning or afternoon.

You can also fortify your alfalfa tea by adding additional ingredients before serving your tea. Water-soluble fertilizers, fish emulsion, and/or Epsom salts can be mixed with your tea to fortify the brew. Simply use the normal amount you would use in a regular fertilizer concoction or a little less to create the ‘drink of champion roses’! As with a regular fertilization program, give a gallon of the tea to large roses and about one-half gallon to miniature and mini-flora roses. Be careful not to stir up the organic material on the bottom as you dip out the tea.

After you have served the tea to your roses, the garbage cans should still have most of the fibrous material and a few gallons of liquid left in the bottom of the can. You can refill the garbage can with water and get a second extraction a few days later. After applying the second extract to your roses, you will need to dispose of the fibrous material. Some rosarians work the fibrous material into the soil of the rose garden as a soil amendment. However, you can also apply the alfalfa tea or the fibrous remains to other flowers. Our perennials especially like the leftovers, so we use all of the material, extract and solids.

So, if you see me carrying bags of rabbit food out to my car, rest assured that I haven't gotten an Easter Bunny. I'm headed home to make tea!

Howard Walters' Thought for the Month:
"The trouble with good advice is that it usually interferes with our plans." From the February, 2002 American Rose magazine.

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