

SOLVING BOTANICAL MYSTERIES WITH SEARCH ENGINES

On a recent Hotline shift, I received a texted question, ending with the sentence:

“Don’t send me Google answers that I get just as easily as you. I live inland valley and Google has no climate areas in consideration.”

I often use Google with good results to identify plant parts. That said, Google is sometimes useful and sometimes a curse. Here’s my take on why:

Bear in mind that your search engine doesn’t know where you live. So, if you type “Is this a good time to prune my roses?” you will likely get multiple links, from commercial plant growers, from general reference sites such as Wikipedia, and if you’re lucky, from a university or botanical garden. As I write this, much of the country is either dealing with snow, worried about the chance of snow, or dealing with a lot of rain from yet another “atmospheric river” of moisture sweeping from the Pacific toward the Atlantic Ocean. Here in San Diego, we are still in a major 20-year drought, the forecast for tomorrow is for sun and mild temperatures, and the surf report is probably part of the weather report. Are we typical? Absolutely not. Your search engine doesn’t know your unique situation, so you will get answers that are probably useful for much of the country, but not us.

I tried a sample search on rose pruning and got this response:

“Prune to remove dead or diseased growth at any time, though it is best **to avoid major pruning from late summer through early winter**, as the shrubs will be starting to go dormant. Deadhead as the flowers fade to keep shrubs blooming longer. Climbing roses are a special group and are often pruned wrong.”

No wonder that poor questioner was confused. In my coastal location, Sunset zone 24, I generally wait until late January to prune the roses, knowing they will take off like a rocket with the first longer days. There is no real dormancy period. I try to induce one by withholding irrigation water and stripping the leaves off the plant. I can even do light pruning in late summer to get yet more bloom through the typically warm fall before I try to coax dormancy. Not at all what Google would recommend.

Let’s now look at a better way to search, given you are in San Diego County (or even in California). We use the websites of the University of California, as Master Gardeners are a national organization linked in each state to the Land Grant Colleges nearby. In our case that is UC Davis where much horticultural



research takes place, and more locally UC Riverside, where they share or are conversant with problems we face here in the southern part of the state. UC has many thousands of pages of information, well organized if you know how to access it. There are, for instance, over 10,000 pages alone on pests, as part of the Integrated Pest Management (IPM) portion of UC's research and information.

Perhaps the easiest way to approach this mountain of information is to see the links to helpful UC web sites that we send with each Hotline email reply to a submitted question:

UC Statewide Integrated Pest Management (IPM) <http://ipm.ucanr.edu/>

UC IPM Pest Notes <http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/index.html>

The California Backyard Orchard <http://homeorchard.ucanr.edu/>

The California Garden Web <http://cagardenweb.ucanr.edu/>

If for some reason the UC data wealth doesn't scratch the itch, you can do another Google search and add ".edu" or perhaps ".org" to the search line. I re-tried the rose pruning query this way and got better results. Yes, I still got some .com entries, although the one from *Sunset Magazine* held promise as I KNOW they speak for the arid west. But entries appeared from U. of Illinois and UC, as well as a couple of credible ones from the *San Diego Union Tribune*.

I think Google really shines in the photo department. If a customer brings me a little tuft of greenery, and after I've tried to do due diligence with questions (is it a shrub, a tree, a flower plant, or what? Does it grow in sun or shade? How big does it get?), I can then formulate a query for images. For instance, "low-growing grey-leaved plant with pink flowers". If I can tell more about the leaves (palmate, toothed, opposite, etc.), I'll add that too. And the Google result is a cascade of photos. Most often it's a plant I have at least seen before, so it's relatively easy to recognize the plant in a nicely lighted, posed photo. Note: So far, I have found no way to put such an open-ended query into the UC database.

The photo, however, doesn't do the entire job. It merely gives me the name so that I can go back to UC with a proper search. Google doesn't solve the whole problem, but if it gets me the Latin name, that is what I want. And just in case you think Botanical Latin should remain in the library, I can attest that the correct Latin name can yield the correct information about the plant. If you really want to know how the plant will perform, use its proper name to unlock its secrets.

So, is my search engine useful for solving botanical mysteries? Absolutely, just remember you may well need more than one source to track down the information you want to address your botanical question.