

Winterizing roses, Part I

There are about five steps to winterizing roses. These should be probably be done in the order I will go through them and at about the time period I suggest. As with any rose task, the need and amount of winterizing depends on many things:

1. the microclimate of various areas of your yard
2. the type of roses you have
3. how winter tender your roses are
4. how concerned you are about your roses.

Each of these can determine how much winterizing you do. In fact, various roses in your garden can be winterized to various degrees based on these factors. One thing to remember is that the wind is more detrimental to the roses than the temperature.

Microclimate

If your roses are near the south or west side of the house, they will get more heat reflecting from the house and need less protection. If they are out in the open and exposed to the prevailing winds, they will need more protection. If they are in raised beds, they will need even more protection.

Type of Roses

The type of roses may determine how you protect. True climbers bloom on last year's growth, so you may need to completely cover them to ensure blooms in the spring. Some shrub roses are very hardy and can do with little protection. Miniatures tend to trap leaves because they are so low to the ground and therefore may not need to be protected as much.

Winter tenderness

Some roses are more tender than others. *St. Patrick* and *Color Magic* are two examples of tender roses. Mauve and yellow roses can be more tender. Own- root roses do with less protection than grafted roses. Roses on fortuniana stock need more protection since the roots are near the surface. You need to learn the tendencies of your roses and act accordingly. If you lose a favorite rose to winter kill, you know that its replacement will need more protection.

Concern for a variety

If you have some roses that are not too exciting or that you plan to get rid of next year, you may choose not to protect them. If they survive it will be fine and if they don't, get out the shovel.

Step 1

In early November, you may begin to prune roses a little. Pruning is generally not done until we have had two frosts of 28F or less. I like to prune to about 30-36 inches. The primary purpose of doing this is to keep the wind from whipping the roses about and exposing the bud union. If the bud union becomes exposed, it can freeze and kill the grafted rose, leaving only the rootstock. Pruning creates less interaction among the canes, thus lowering the chances of one cane's thorns scratching another and damaging the cane or just two canes constantly rubbing against each other and damaging one or both canes. If you have time, you may want to prune out

some of the spindly inner canes that could be involved in this action. This is a job I usually save for spring, but it really is more effective in the fall. If you have time, you may want to thin out some of the miniatures so they aren't so dense in the spring when they start to leaf out. Again, fall pruning is not a necessity, but it may help prolong the life of the bush.

Many people want to prune back very low in the fall, but this may be counterproductive. We have had some mild winters recently and in those cases, if longer canes do not dieback, they will be ready to produce more blooms in the spring than if you cut them back to a lower height. Some people like to pull off all the leaves before winterizing, reasoning that there may be blackspot spores getting ready to develop on untarnished leaves, so by removing all leaves, the chance of overwintering disease is eliminated. The one fallacy there is that blackspot can overwinter on the canes, also.

If we have had some good frosts, many of the lower leaves will fall off on their own and when you prune the upper part that still has leaves, many of the bushes will already be defoliated and you won't have to worry whether to strip leaves or not. I generally only pull off diseased or dying leaves, particularly from varieties where the leaves come off easily. You can get scratched pretty good pulling off some of the more stubborn leaves. I have heard someone state that it is better to prune the leaves off rather than pull them. I don't have an answer for that.

Step 2

In order to try to keep diseases in line, many people like to remove all the leaves that have fallen to the ground. This is not too difficult with larger roses; however, I generally throw up my hands with the miniatures. On varieties where a couple of frosts will cause leaves to fall, I will pick up as many as possible, but I have long ago given up trying to pick up all the mini leaves. The bottom line is that once you get the first spore in your garden, you will have blackspot forever regardless of how careful you are. Therefore, you really just have to maintain the best sanitation and spraying program you can to minimize blackspot. A little blackspot should not be of great concern. If you make a decent effort all year long, you will have a pretty clean rose bush with lots of nice blooms. It's also a good idea to remove weeds before winter sets in and treat the soil with a preventive like Preen. It may cut back on the weeding required in the spring.

Step 3

Check pH. As time goes by the soil in our area tends to become more acid. Typically, we want the pH to be about 6.0-6.5 to allow the nutrients (N-P-K, Fe, Ca, etc.) to be taken up by the root systems. As pH gets out of that range, the roots are not able to use as much of the available fertilizer you put down. In order to correct this, crushed or pelletized limestone needs to be added. There are a number of methods for determining the pH. You may buy expensive or inexpensive pH gauges and take your own readings or get a soil sample bag from the WVU Extension Agency in Institute and mail in a sample. Now is a good time to apply limestone if needed. I usually take two-three readings in each bed with my pH meter and average them. Since there doesn't seem to be a definitive report on how much limestone to add, I put about ½ cup on those that are 5.7-6.0 and 1 cup per bush on beds below 5.6. Since the limestone is slow to go through the soil, by putting it down now it will have some time to work its way into the soil by spring. It's best to scratch it into the soil rather than just let it sit on top.

Next month: Part II Covering the Roses and Dormant Sprays