

Winter Protection for Roses

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As we move further into fall and closer to winter we have to consider what we will do to protect our roses, if anything. We have several options to consider. The first option is to do nothing more than to try and insure your roses are healthy as they go into winter. If they are healthy they should survive the winter with no extra work on your part. The second option is to provide some level of protection to some bushes. A third option is to provide very complete protection to all of your bushes.

The first option is easiest to implement. Continue to spray and water your bushes. When spraying now, focus on preventing the fungal diseases of Black Spot and Mildew. These can hurt your plants most as we move into winter. I will focus on the second option because this is the level of protection I try to provide my roses.

But why do we need to protect at all since the rose bush should be strong enough to survive winter? By protecting your rose bushes you try to accomplish two things. The first is to make you feel better. You have done something positive to protect your roses from the harsh winter. The second is to protect your financial investment. As roses continue to get more expensive you don't want to have to replace a lot of bushes in the spring. One year, one of our members didn't get his bushes protected before winter hit and he lost over 50. But then some consider this is a good opportunity allowing room to add new varieties.

When we protect we are not trying to keep the roses warm. We are trying to prevent the bud union and the canes originating from it from experiencing the freeze-thaw-freeze cycle. This happens on warm winter days when the sun warms and thaws the canes and then the night time drop in temperature freezes them again. This often causes the cells in the cane to rupture and die. In the spring when you see canes that have turned thin and black this is the cause.

If you don't want to protect all of your roses, which ones need it the most? Experience has shown that the lighter colored rose bushes need protection the most. Your white, pink, pink blend and yellow hybrid teas are the ones that seem to have the most damage in the winter.

To go one step further, I always protect newly planted roses for the first two years regardless of what kind they are. This is a good way to help your newly planted roses through winter and become fully established.

About the middle of October here in the mid-Atlantic region, I start to save newspapers and make them into paper collars. I take two full sheets, four pages, folded along the seam. I staple three or four of these together top to bottom. I make up a lot of these to use. Then as the leaves start to fall, I gather lots of oak leaves. Usually 30-40 leaf bags full are what I need for the size of my garden. Each bag will take care of two to five bushes. I have found that oak leaves stay dryer than maple or other leaves. Because oak leaves don't mat, the air space between the leaves provide more insulation. Maple leaves hold water and tend

to turn soggy after a rain. In late fall I cut my very tall hybrid teas back to shoulder height. This helps to keep them from being blown back and forth exposing the roots to freezing weather. I then put the newspaper collars around the bushes with the seam up and the open part down, stapling the open end together to close the collar. The paper collars will last all winter. I then fill the collars with the oak leaves. With miniatures I use the same technique but am careful not to fill the collars. Too many leaves can smother your miniatures. After I have finished, I put a burlap wind break around the more exposed beds. Then I hope it turns cold and we get about six inches of snow. Snow provides great protection and water to the roses as it melts.

There are several alternatives to the material I use. In place of the paper collars you can use chicken wire, plastic collar or roofing paper. Instead of oak leaves you can use pine needles, mushroom soil, dirt or straw. If you use dirt don't take it from your rose beds. It will expose their roots. Whatever you use, you want to insure that the bud union and the first six to twelve inches of the canes are covered. In the spring you need to remove all of the protection. I just spread the oak leaves I use as mulch and let it decompose in the beds. This adds lots of organic matter to the beds.

I usually try to get my protection in place starting earlier than most in our area. The conventional method is to wait until after the first hard frost, usually around the middle of December. But that is occasionally a little late and winter may have already arrived. I usually try to get most of my protection in place Thanksgiving weekend. I have this long weekend off so have the time to do the necessary work. And it is usually still warmer then. I have experienced no problems by putting the protection on a few weeks early.

For those of you that want to provide more protection to their bushes there are several ways to do this. You can use rose cones. These Styrofoam cones fit over the entire bush after they have been cut back. Some rosarians build entire protective boxes around their beds. But they live further north than we do. There is also a disadvantage to them that small rodents find them to be wonderful warm and dry hotels in the winter. They also have to be checked regularly in the spring to prevent disease from starting. There is also the Minnesota tip method where you, in effect, tip the bush over and bury it until spring.

There are many different views on how to provide care for your roses in the winter. Talk to different rosarians at our monthly meetings and apply the information you feel will best suit your situation and roses.

If you would like more information, contact the West Jersey Rose Society at info@wjrs.org