

It's time to prepare roses for the long winter

By Marge Alpern
special writer

Our winters are severe and our garden roses, unlike wild ones, aren't genetically programmed to endure the wide temperature swings we so often experience from December until April.

If we could rely on a deep and permanent 6-inch snow cover, as gardeners in the Upper Peninsula can, additional coverage wouldn't be necessary. But if we in southern Michigan don't protect our fragile rose bushes, their survival becomes a matter of sheer luck.

Therefore, at this time, prudent gardeners give careful thought to assuring the reappearance of their treasured rose bushes next spring.

Winter preparation actually begins around Aug. 15, when fertilizing should stop. This discourages production of new growth, which may not have time to harden off before winter and will most likely be destroyed.

The next step in preparing the bush for winter comes around Sept. 15. After that time flowers should not be cut. By allowing the petals to fall naturally and the rose hips to form, the plant is signaled to go into dormancy.

A HEALTHY BUSH obviously has a better chance to survive than one that goes into winter in a weakened condition. This fall, because of the prolonged wet period and extensive white mildew and black spot infections, super sanitation procedures are recommended.

A thorough raking of the rose garden, especially right under each bush, will help get rid of dormant spores and prevent reinfection in the spring. Don't put the raked leaves on the compost pile. Some gardeners are closing the season with a late spraying of fungicide if disease was especially devastating.

The union or graft knob should be planted two to three inches below the ground surface regardless of where it was located in the pot. The shoots should appear to come from below the soil level.

Jane Zich, an experienced and knowledgeable gardener, believes this will help clean up the area and assure a healthy start next spring. Adding a small amount of liquid detergent to the fungicide will cause the solution to adhere to the remaining leaves. Otherwise, it will just run off.

Pruning the shrub in the fall isn't recommended by any authorities with whom I am familiar.

Deborah Silver is a serious student of rose culture, a garden designer and head of the perennial division at Goldner-Walsh Landscaping, Pontiac.

She states emphatically that you shouldn't prune any part of the rose bush in the fall.

I was very surprised to find an opposing opinion in a recent "Horticulture" magazine. It said, "Trim long canes by half and shorter ones by about a third. The aim is to reduce each bush's overall bulk so that it can be protected most efficiently."

I recommend waiting until spring when one can clearly see the dead portions of the rose bush that haven't survived the winter.

A WELL-PLANTED BUSH bush has the best chance of survival. It has been said that in spite of all the illnesses that affect roses, improper planting is the most common cause of early death. This generally means

too shallow planting. There is a tendency to plant a rose bush at the same soil level at which it is growing at the time of purchase, because this is the basic gardening principle.

However, roses are different. The union or graft knob should be planted two to three inches below the ground surface regardless of where it was located in the pot. The shoots should appear to come from below the soil level.

During the summer months the graft is protected from excessive exposure to heat or dryness. During the winter months, and this is the more crucial reason for this practice, the most vulnerable part of the plant is well covered.

Depth of planting is important for other reasons as well. Deep planting

keeps the structure firmly anchored against wind rocking. It helps prevent suckering, which is the production of stems growing out from the root portion of the graft rather than the top portion of the graft, that was selected for its bloom.

But by far the most important reason is that this joint is extremely susceptible to winter damage and subsequent death. If the woody knobs of your rose bushes are poised above the ground, transplant the bushes now.

Silver said that November is the "ideal time" for the move. She explained that now the plant is dormant, it will not be disturbed by its procedure nearly as much as it would in the spring when it comes out of dormancy and in the process of initiating new growth. As long as the ground can be dug, it is safe to transplant roses.

In December, even as late as Christmas according to Zich, is the time to mulch the bushes. Applying the mulch before the ground is frozen isn't recommended, because small rodents find the mound a warm winter nesting home.

Just before the ground is about to freeze, bring in a load of soil from elsewhere in the garden and pile it in a heap around the base of each plant. Light, sandy soil is considered better than a humusy mix. Don't obtain the soil from between the plants since that risks exposing the roots and crowns to freezing and so debates the very purpose of this "hilling," as it is called.

Pat the 8-10-inch cone-shaped mounds firmly to make sure each bit of the canes are snugly encased. I

pile ground leaves on top of the soil for added protection and place a few evergreen boughs on top to keep it all in place.

Perhaps this sounds like a tremendous amount of work. Many gardeners avoid growing roses for that very reason. I rather enjoy this process since it usually is my last contact with the garden until spring.

I choose a sunny day and take my time, knowing that I am participating in nature's cycles and that my roses will reward me next summer.

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