KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension
Meadowlark District

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Winterizing your Roses

Although it does not feel like winter, we are approaching our colder months. You may be wondering how you can ensure your rose bushes are ready for the cold weather. Most of the shrub, landscape, or older rose varieties can survive our winters without much issue, but some of the hybrid teas and other modern varieties require winterizing. If you have a young rose of any variety, winterizing can help ensure that it lives through the winter despite not having a fully established root system.

The first step, pruning can be done as soon as roses go dormant. If your roses are exposed to winds, cut back canes to 36-inches and remove weak or thin canes. Tie the remaining canes together loosely to keep them secure during windy weather. If the canes are allowed to whip in the wind it can cause damage to the crown and disturb the soil. If your roses are well protected from the wind, you can wait until late winter to prune your roses.

Then clean up any plant debris in the area surrounding the roses, especially any leaves from the rose bushes or canes that you pruned off. This will help prevent any diseases from overwintering and infecting your roses next summer.

Then next steps are dependent on weather, not time of year. You will want to make mounds of soil at the base of your roses only AFTER several hard frosts have occurred, but BEFORE the ground freezes. Doing this too early keeps the stems warm and moist which promotes mold growth, while too late risks damaging the sensitive graft union where the rootstalk attaches to the above ground growth. We have had two days (November 9th and 10th) where temperatures dipped below 25 degrees, but our soil has not gone below 40 degrees yet, so now is the perfect time to make these mounds around your roses.

When making mounds around the roses, aim for 8 to 10 inches of soil or compost around the base of each rose. Bring in new soil for this instead of displacing soil. Soil acts as insulation for roots in the cold winter, so you do not want to remove any soil from areas around the roses, or you may increase the chance of the roots getting frost damage.

Once the ground has frozen, which generally happens mid-December, add a 4-inch layer of straw, leaves, wood chips or other mulch over the mound and cover with a layer of soil to hold it in place. This will help protect the plants from the cold but also prevent early budding during warm winter and early spring days. You can check the current soil temperatures online using the K-State Mesonet tool online or check with your local extension office.

You can then place a layer or soil or mesh wire over the mulch to keep it in place. You can also make a wire cage around the rose as a barrier to keep the mulch in place. As the mulch settles during winter you may need to add more.

When the ground thaws in the spring remove the mulch and soil from the base of the plant to return the soil level to normal.