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CONTACT: SUSAN MCCOY
610.388.9330/SUSAN@GARDENMEDIAGROUP.COM

TIPS ON HOW TO PUT YOUR ROSES TO BED FOR WINTER FROM A NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED ROSE GROWER

As the days shorten and the temperatures dip, it is time to think about putting your roses to bed for a long winter rest.

Garden roses need some protection from the ravages of winter, even a relatively mild one, and a little work now can pay off in glorious blooms and healthier plants next spring.

According to Steve Hutton, president of The Conard-Pyle Co. (www.starroses.com), known for its award winning Star® Roses since the turn of the century, the best protection for roses and other outdoor plants going into winter is good health. Gardeners who have followed a preventive maintenance program should have roses which have kept their foliage all summer and into fall.

If this year's heat and drought have taken a toll on your roses, Hutton offers some hope -- and practical suggestions -- to help you improve the health of your roses and give them a better chance of surviving the winter.

1. WATER TO PREVENT WINTER DRYING For starters, it is important to water roses well before the ground freezes, Hutton says. This does not mean deluging the plants with a large stream of water all at once. Instead, it is best to apply the water with a soaker hose or similar trickle application over an extended period of time.

"This may take anywhere from 30 minutes to a few hours depending on how dry the ground is and how big the trickle is," Hutton explains.

2. PRUNE SLIGHTLY TO CURB BREAKAGE Around Thanksgiving is a good time to do some limited pruning of your rose bushes. Just remove a few inches of the twiggy top growth of the plants -- nothing more. This will prevent snow and ice from accumulating and possibly breaking the plants during the winter.

"It is important *not* to trim back the main stems of the roses," Hutton cautions, "because these hold food for the roots during the winter."

3. CLEAN UP TO REDUCE DISEASE To minimize disease problems, he suggests cleaning the ground around the roses of any fallen leaves or other plant debris that might be harboring parasites. An added precaution is to spray the stems of the roses with a fungicide. "Make sure to spray the ground under and around the roses as well," Hutton advises. "This can significantly reduce black spot problems next spring."

4. MULCH WELL TO INSULATE FROM COLD Hutton explains that, "The most serious damage to roses -- and any other plants that are marginally hardy -- occurs when the ground is frozen and the roots cannot take up moisture. Covering the stems protects against this problem and also keeps the crown of the plant from getting too cold and dying."

The most common type of winter protection is to mound soil six to 10 inches up the canes of the rose. You can use soil taken from between the plants or bring it in from elsewhere. For added protection place leaves, evergreen boughs or similar material among the plants as insulation against winter winds or extreme cold. Since roses can become sunburned even in winter, this also serves as a buffer against the bright winter sun which can cause plants to dry out when the ground is frozen.

Of course, along the west coast and in the deep South, the ground doesn't freeze so winter protection is not critical, although it is still a good idea to clean up around the plant.

Along the Atlantic coast and upper South, less winter protection is needed. It is often sufficient just to add mulch around the rose plants to insulate the ground and prevent freezing and thawing. Such repeated freezing and thawing is a major culprit when overwintering roses. The mulching acts as an insulator to ward off problems. If you use a mulch that drains easily -- such as peat moss -- you can heap it around the canes for additional protection.

5. FERTILIZE TO GET A JUMP ON SPRING

Sharing more tips he has gleaned over almost 50 years of working with roses, Hutton suggests that a way to reduce your spring work load and get your roses off to a better start is to apply fertilizer after you have done the mulching. Unlike the preventive measures which you should complete by the end of November, you can fertilize any time during the winter. Use a fertilizer specified for roses or any balanced fertilizer such as a 10-10-10. Follow the directions and apply to the top of the soil -- even on frozen ground or on top of snow. Winter rains and melting snow will carry the fertilizer down to the roots, ready to nourish your roses when the spring sun warms the soil.

LOOKING AHEAD TO SPRING

When the forsythia starts to bloom, it is time to gently wake your rose plants. Carefully remove the winter protection from around the canes. If you used materials that drain easily, you can incorporate them into the soil or use as a mulch around the plants. If you did not fertilize during the winter, now is the time.

According to Hutton, when forsythia blooms is also the time to prune back the canes of your roses. In most cases, they should be cut leaving no more than 12 inches of the old canes. Also prune out any light, twiggy growth from the base of the plant. This creates a stronger plant with lots of blooms from the first flush in spring.

As new leaves start to show, spray your roses with a fungicide to control black spot, making certain to cover the stems, new shoots, leaves and the ground around the plant. This will help clean up any of the disease that may have survived the winter.

"If you only spray your roses once, doing so in early spring will do the best job of getting your roses off to a fast, healthy start," Hutton says.

These tips apply to conventional garden roses such as the hybrid teas, grandifloras and floribundas.

SHRUB ROSES NEED NO WINTER PROTECTION

"If you have Star® Landscape Roses such as the Bonica, Carefree Delight, or any of the Meidiland® shrub roses, none of this winter protection is needed. You can ignore all of the above," Hutton says. "If you wish to do pruning and fertilizing, however, spring is the right time for them."

As the north winds begin to blow, your rose blooms and scents are gone -- but not forgotten. A little effort this fall will ensure that they survive to delight you again next year.

For more rose care tips, visit www.StarRoses.com.