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Winterizing Roses

Although most shrub roses are hardy through Kansas winters, many hybrid teas and other modern varieties require protection. It is important to winterize roses not by calendar date, but based on the weather. Winterizing too early keeps the stems warm and moist which promotes disease. Winterizing too late risks damaging the sensitive graft union where the rootstalk attaches to the above ground growth.

When your roses have died back, clean up any plant debris and remove the dead foliage from the area. Pests and disease can carry over into the spring if the foliage is left behind. Once we have had several hard frosts, you can begin the rest of the winterization process. Create a mound of soil or compost eight to ten inches high around each rose plant. Bring in new soil for this instead of using soil from around the roses. If you try to create a mound with soil from around the roses, you might take too much soil off the surface and expose the roots to cold weather, risking damage.

Once the ground has frozen, 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 while also preventing early budding during warm winter and early spring days. As the mulch settles during winter you may need to add more.

Finally, prune the 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.

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. If the mulch and soil is not removed before the growing season hits, your roses may be stunted or have abnormal growth.