

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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The days are shortening and the nights are getting colder. This is a signal for the roses to start going into dormancy. Stop fertilizing with a fertilizer that contains nitrogen. You can use a fertilizer with no nitrogen in it during September, October and November to strengthen the roots, then no fertilizer until spring. Leave the hips on the roses, this is an other indicator for the bush to go into dormancy.

The reason for covering roses for winter is to protect the crown and graft bud. If the graft union is killed the rose you bought is dead. The bush may still grow in spring, but that growth is coming from the root stock. It won't bloom the first year, but the next year it will have either red single or white cluster blooms. These roses need to be shovel pruned.

There are a couple of things to do before the mulch material is put on the roses. They need to be pruned the back to three feet. This is to keep the wind from moving the rose around and breaking off the roots or pulling it out of the ground completely. Remove all the leaves and rake all debris from around and under the bushes. This will help cut down disease next year. Blackspot spores go dormant and over winter in this material. Remove the leaves from the branch and retie the climbing roses, being sure to put material between the support and the cane. Remove any canes that are crossing. This will reduce damage to canes.

A number of things can be used for mulch: compost, soil, shavings, or leaves. Large maple leaves are great if they are run over with the lawn mower before putting them on so they don't become a solid mat. Soil should not be taken from around the rose. Get it from another area. Bales of shavings can be bought at feed stores. Evergreen boughs can be used to hold the shavings in place. Don't skimp on whatever material is used. The more of the canes that get covered the better. There will be more live cane to prune next spring.

Roses can be mulched before it freezes or after. The idea is to keep the ground at an even temperature. In the Midwest when it freezes, the ground will stay frozen until late spring. In our area we have freezing for two to four days, then it turns warm, then it will freeze, then turn warm. The rose does not know what to do, grow or not. If it stays warm too long the rose may start to grow, and then if it freezes it may kill the rose or damage it severely.

When you get an itch between the shoulders and a small voice in the back of your head starts telling you it is time to mulch, **DO IT**. Next year your roses will say thank you by producing beautiful blooms and less diseases.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.