

Poor David's Almanac

By Dave Ingram, Master Rosarian

*"Jack Frost's on his way,
To force winter's slumber.
Fair warning to us:
T'is the end of summer."*

Getting Started With Roses – Volume VI (September)

Last article, we suggested you try the Integrated Pest Management approach when dealing with pests and diseases of roses, as outlined in your copy of "*Growing Roses in Colorado*." Keep in mind that, in my garden at least, fall is a prime season for mildew and blackspot outbreaks. So far, my low-toxic, organic program of:

1. Daily monitoring,
2. Gardening to reduce plant stress,
3. Pulling off suspected diseased leaves,
4. Keeping my garden beds clean,
5. and occasional use of GreenCure

has kept my garden of 100 or so roses pretty healthy (knock, knock on wood, wood).

When you set up your garden this spring, if you took our advice to select healthy plants from a local nursery, then planted them in good soil with proper spacing, you may not have any of these problems. If so, congratulations! If not, remember that our network of Consulting Rosarians and other Society members can help answer your questions, and ease your learning frustrations.

Cold Warning: The main issue we have to deal with this month is preparing for cold. The record for the earliest freeze is September 9, but we have reached 26 degrees on the 14th, and 14 degrees on the 29th. By October, the average low is 33 degrees. Winter's coming, folks—now is the time to start preparing.

Winterizing Plan: For me, the # 1 way to help get your plants through the winter intact is to send them into winter in the healthiest condition possible. Managing fungal diseases and deadheading under the flower heads maximizes available leaf surfaces. More leaves help the rose produce more food. Sure, some of that food will be used for growth and flowers. But the rest will be stored within the plant to help it survive the winter. No form of winter protection I know of will ensure that a struggling rose survives. And a strong, healthy rose may only need for you to leave it alone.

Fall Tips:

We advise that you not feed your roses after August 15.

As daily temperatures fall, ease back on your watering. The idea is to slowly toughen up this year's tender growth.

Particularly with newer plants, deadhead beneath flower heads (if you deadhead at all), rather than lower on the stem. This slows the stimulation of new growth.

Some repeat-blooming roses develop seed heads (hips) after blooming; late September is the right time to let them do so. This will also slow growth.

By all means, let your roses flower as much as they'd like, but don't force them to. Fall should be like a long, slow lullaby for your garden.

Fall, without the heat stress, is a wonderful time for rose flowers. Many of your plants will just explode with color. But remember what I said last spring about freezes and new, water-swollen growth? That advice still applies, so here's September's heartbreaking tip:

Freeze Warning: If you notice strong, new growth starting from the base of the plant (basal breaks), you need to snap or cut it off (and seal the pruning wound). New basal growth may take more than 50 days to bloom, and we might not have that much time before the whole cane freezes, possibly damaging the entire plant. Even if it does bloom, the cane will not be mature enough to make it through the winter. In addition, a new cane uses up a lot of energy we'd like the rose to store for the cold months ahead. So let the plant bloom on the canes that are already in place; you'll still get plenty of flowers on the top of the canopy. The cooling nights can "harden off" the existing canes to get the rose ready for our long winters. Our job with winterizing is to make sure the base of the rose is safe.

Smart Tip: Check at the base of each rose plant. Has the graft union emerged? Sometimes soil settles or gets washed away during the summer. If necessary, throw a couple of shovelfuls of dirt (not mulch) down to rebury the graft (or own-root growth point) to the proper depth.

Can you plant roses in the fall? Dickey subject. My experience has been that I've had success planting very winter hardy roses like Rugosas or Canadian Hardys. But I've had trouble getting newly planted Hybrid Tea or Floribundas through the winter alive. They may not have time to grow a viable root system, and our winters are too long and harsh for roses not well established. (Remember, my garden conditions may be different than yours). If you want to try, no guarantees, but here are some tips to succeed:

Nursery sales can be enticing. But no matter how cheap the price – look at the rose. Is it healthy? Is it ragged from drying out a few times? If it is not vibrant and happy, you are wasting your money. I've learned this lesson the hard way. More than once (sigh!)

Plant early—as soon after Labor Day as the heat allows. Fall can be a great time to grow roots, but time matters.

A rose that's been in a pot all summer may be badly “root bound.” A few wounding slices through the surface of the root ball will encourage the roots to grow out into the surrounding soil.

Try a mycorrhizae product around the plant roots. (my-core-AYE-zah, a beneficial root fungus) Your local nursery can help you select one. This should help the roots develop faster during the short fall season.

Mulch to protect the plant through erratic weather conditions.

Be prepared to protect plants against early snows.

Water very carefully. Remember, it's getting colder, not warmer.

Good luck.

Snow Warning: Snow? Already? Yep! Some years, we've had heavy, wet snowfalls in late September, the kind that break tree limbs and destroy awnings. What should you do if a storm is forecast?

Make sure your mulch is to the proper depth, or more.

Securely tie all climber canes to the trellis.

Most roses are flexible enough to handle at least some snow. You might get a snapped cane or two, and a little tip freeze.

If you are worried about your Hybrid Teas and Floribundas with stiffer canes, you can drive a stake into the ground and tie the canes to the stake.

Snow can act as an insulation blanket, and is a fine source of water as it melts. To the prepared gardener, snow can be your friend.

New Garden Plan: Fall is an ideal time to begin work on a new garden that can hold lots of new roses! The mellow temperatures are easier on you as you dig, and the soil has a chance to settle and develop microorganisms over the fall and winter, while you're inside by the fire, shopping through catalogs for your new plants. By next May, you'll have a well-developed soil structure ready to welcome your new roses.

Next Article: Poor David's Winterizing Checklist! (This may include Hot Apple Cider for the gardener!)