

Norm's Notes

"Overwintering Tender Roses"

By Norm DeNeal

From the outset I want to thank Larry and Patricia McGrath in Butte for this valuable information on overwintering tender roses. Having returned to Montana 20 years ago, I'd forgotten the unique beauty of a hybrid tea or florabunda rose. Beautiful as they are, hardy shrub roses cannot seem to match much of the form and color of their delicate tender cousins. So to see Pat and Larry's garden vibrant with large, several-year-old, tender roses (not to mention a home with several rose bowls crowded with dozens of flowers), was as exciting as winning the lottery.

It's an old technique. First generation immigrants buried their tender roses in soil. But for some reason the practice has not been carried on by most successive Montana generations. And it is burying in soil, not just covering with leaves or straw, that is the essential secret. Some old-timers still prune and hill up their tender roses in soil, but it is actually digging up and tipping unpruned roses on their sides and then covering with soil in about a 10 inch-deep trench that results in the next year's superior abundant growth. After all, roses expend most of their energy in growing canes. So not pruning the canes to about 6 inches in the autumn has the plant not start from scratch every year.

In the spring, as soon as the soil thaws on the surface, it is carefully scraped away layer after layer over a period of several days or even weeks exposing tender leaves that have already begun to unfurl. Still there are too many future days of cold for the plants to successfully survive. They still need a tent or coldframe for protection. This process gives another 60 growing days that would otherwise be unavailable.

About six weeks before the roses are to be buried, spraying with a systemic insecticide is recommended as a health guard. Then in the autumn when the rose has finally "died" back, heavily spray the plant with an oil spray such as Ortho's "Elox"® to both protect the wintering plant and smother any insects or eggs that may be on the plant. Also spray the trench in which the plant will be placed. With twine, carefully bind up all the canes from the bottom to the top into a fairly tight pillar leaving about an extra 2-3 feet of twine on both the top and bottom of the plant. It will be this extra twine that will be left above the buried plant to identify its placement in the soil when it comes time to unbury the rose in the spring. Then with a spading fork carefully dig around the roots until plant can be turned on its side in a trench. The plant can then be buried.

Hybrid roses are heavy feeders requiring constant fertilizer. However, do not apply fertilizer in the spring until substantial leaf growth has taken hold, otherwise the fertilizer will actually weaken the plant.

Sure it is extra work. But considering the results, for many it is worth the effort. In Montana with its sometimes severe winters and dessicating winds, this technique will not have tender roses only raised as annuals.

Further detailed information can be found in "Growing Roses in Cold Climates" by Jerry Olson and John Whitman published by Contemporary Books, \$39.95. This is a companion book to the often seen "Growing Perennials in Cold Climates" book.