



Winter Protection for Roses

You can grow many types of roses in the Flathead Valley. Roses range in hardiness from the very hardy rugosa (shrub roses) to the more temperamental hybrid teas, which are the type you would find in a bouquet from the florist. The difference between roses involves how they are grown. Hardy roses are mostly grown on their own root stock, that is to say, they are all one plant. Hybrid teas on the other hand, are *grafted* varieties. One plant has been made to grow attached or grafted, to the root of another. It is this *bud union* of the graft that needs the most winter protection.

The need for protection and the level of protection necessary varies with the type of rose. We generally do not protect hardy shrub roses here. They are thought of as reliably hardy in most areas. The next hardiest roses are the Old English Shrub roses. These generally have a graft but they come from hardier stock so the graft is somewhat hardier. They still benefit from winter protection. Finally, the hybrid teas are the least hardy of all. They cannot be grown in areas of the valley below Zone 4 and we recommend winter protection in all areas. (For simplicity we will consider all grandifloras and floribundas as hybrid teas although they are technically separate.)

Many roses easily tolerate low temperatures but they cannot handle quick or extreme changes in temperatures. Unfortunately, Montana's winters tend to have such changes nearly every year. Protection here is geared towards having the roses freeze and stay frozen. As noted, it is the graft that is most susceptible to harm. The branches can also suffer desiccation (drying out) and roses will appreciate wind protection. It is best to take care of your roses after a few hard freezes. We generally recommend doing it before the end of October.

For Hybrid Teas, start by trimming canes down to 18–20" high. Remove any leaves or flowers that are left and clean up the ground around the plant. Then mound compost or soil over the plant to cover the graft with at least 8" of material. It is important to use soil or compost. Soil should come from another location. Do not scrape soil from around the shrub because you may expose roots. Using compost gives the added benefit of top dressing your shrub with nutrients for spring. You need only uncover the graft in spring. Leaves or straw do not offer enough protection in our climate. They are often recommended in garden writing but they are not appropriate in Montana.

You can also at this time use anti-transpirant products such as Wilt-Pruf®. These products coat the plant with a wax type substance that prevents drying out. They work well and we highly recommend their use, especially in areas exposed to wind. Follow the label instructions exactly. Keep in mind that they must be applied at air temperatures above 40°F. You can apply them early before you actually winterize your roses.

Use twine to tie the branches into a bundle. Cover this bundle with burlap or another breathable fabric. **DO NOT USE PLASTIC.** Plastic can cause problems on sunny days when it heats up too fast. Secure the bottom edges of the fabric with soil so that a good seal occurs and no wind can blow up it. You can also use vented styrofoam rose cones that you simply place over the whole plant and secure to the ground with landscape stakes.

For English Shrub Roses, the procedure is much the same with one important difference. You need not cut the canes back as far. You can leave them long and tie them bent over to wrap them with burlap. However, unless the rose is exposed to wind, you can take a chance and not wrap the canes. This is also true for climbing roses. You will find you will need to do more pruning in spring as more winter kill is likely to occur to the canes. For Miniature Roses, you may simply mulch the entire plant, leaving no canes exposed above the mulch.

In spring, it is always a judgment call as far as when to un-do your winter protection. It should almost always be taken off by May 1st at the latest. Some years it can come off as early as April 1st. On average, we are uncovering plants by the middle to end of April. Watch for late spring storms with sudden temperature changes.