

# A Rose Grower's SURVIVAL MANUAL

With proper preparation most  
any rose can make it through a  
hard winter. Peter Schneider

BLAME THEM ON El Niño, global warming, or some fluke of nature, the mild winters from 1998 through 2000 gave midwestern rose growers a taste of what it's like to garden in the Carolinas. Garden-grown roses graced Thanksgiving tables, leaves never fell from canes, and spring pruning became an exercise in calculus, instead of just exercise. Faced with feet instead of inches of good wood on hybrid teas and floribundas, I had to think about rose pruning in a whole new way. But I never abandoned winter protection, the basic measures necessary to keep a rose alive through a typical USDA Zone 5 winter.

When I talked to new rosarians around Ohio during those years, I was astonished at what they were growing: Bourbons such as 'Zéphirine Drouhin' and 'Souvenir de la Malmaison'. Tender hybrid teas, such as 'Elegant Beauty' and 'Royal Highness'. Tree roses! "What are you using for winter protection?" I would ask, only to be answered with quizzical looks. There's not much discussion of winter protection at the Home Depot garden center, or in rose books from England, where roses grow up into trees, and tree roses need no winter protection. A gardener who experiences this sort of success right from the start has no reason to convert to a system that promises the same result in exchange for a lot more work. I am no different, and had I started my garden during these years I would

have seen no reason to winter-protect roses, dig calla lilies, or put a heater in the fish pond.

With the winter of 2000–2001, however, Zone 7 deserted northern Ohio, and our traditional conditions—temperatures to  $-20^{\circ}\text{F}$  with unreliable snow cover—returned with a vengeance. In spring 2001 the phone calls began. "My roses look as if they're dead. What should I do?"

**Some especially tough roses, such as the rugosas, albas, and most gallicas and kordesii, need no winter protection at all in Zones 4 and 5.** But, because we are gardeners, we do not limit ourselves to these sorts. For everything else, the question is: How much winter protection does a particular plant need?

The rose classification system, based in roughly equal measure on genetics, commercial considerations, and whimsy, is helpful only as a starting point. Noisette roses, for example, are supposed to be hardy only to Zone 7. This is usually true, but at least one



## The Minnesota Tip Method of Protection



Loosen half the root system, and dig a hole opposite for the crown.



Cover the plant with a thick layer of soil or compost.

Noisette, 'Reine Olga de Wurtemberg', is perfectly hardy for me in Zone 5b. While hybrid teas are said to be winter hardy with nominal protection to Zone 5, a few (notably the exquisite creations of the Californian

Joe Winchel) are quite tender here, even with extraordinary protection. So a rose's classification is neither a guarantee of its hardiness nor a reason to strike it off your wish list. Color is often a helpful consideration: yellow, apricot, and buff-colored roses are almost always more perishable than their red and pink counterparts. This tenderness is a genetic legacy of 'Soleil d'Or', the weakling rose that ushered these colors into modern roses.

Microclimate makes a big difference as well. If you have a spot for roses near the south side of your house, or by a pond, or above a slope that will drain away frost, you can grow roses that would usually be considered inappropriate in your area. For many years one Ohio rosarian grew tender roses with almost no winter dieback because his garden was built on top of a cellar. And whatever advantage your topography doesn't give you is still there for the taking: any rose can be brought through any winter, if you want to work hard enough.

**In Zones 5 and 6, most hybrid teas and floribundas can be successfully wintered with a simple protective mound.** This is not done with the expectation that a half-bushel of compost is going to stop the ground from freezing. Quite the opposite. When applied in a timely manner—when the ground is frozen but before temperatures have fallen into single

## Do's and Don'ts for Mounding

### MATERIALS

The perfect material for mounding has enough weight to stay put and not blow away and enough texture to keep from matting down into an impenetrable layer. Sawdust is a good bet if you have a ready source. The best leaves for mounding are oak, which don't form a mat or create a gooey mess as maples do. Linden and ginkgo also turn into slimy clods and should be avoided. Keep the oak

leaves in place with chicken wire. Compost is great if you have lots of compost and few roses. Garden soil works fine, but be sure to get it from another part of the garden. Scraping it up from beside the rose you are trying to protect will simply expose its roots to the cold. Avoid using manure as it tends to burn the canes.

### WHEN AND HOW TO MOUND

It is more important to completely cover the bud union than to achieve a particular

height. I dump a 5-gallon bucket of sawdust over the top of each rose. This covers the bud union and some of the root zone. Mound your roses when ground is frozen but before temperatures fall into single digits (Fahrenheit). In northern Ohio this is almost always Thanksgiving week-end.

### WHEN TO UNEARTH

You should unearth your roses just before the sprouts break, which in my garden occurs

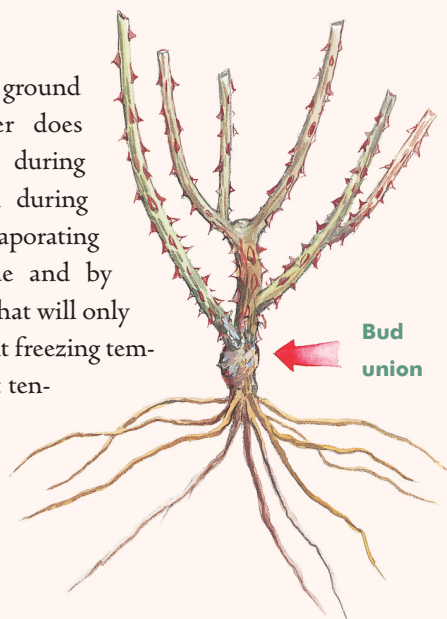
just before the forsythia blooms. For the job I use a child's 3-tine cultivator. I bought one in a drugstore about fifteen years ago and have used it for this purpose and this purpose only ever since. Another approach is to use a garden hose with a gentle flow of water, which will wash the winter protection away from the bud union. This is foolproof but can be time consuming.

digits—it will keep the ground from thawing. Winter does more damage to roses during sunny interludes than during snowstorms, both by evaporating water from rose tissue and by stimulating cell action that will only be blasted by subsequent freezing temperatures. Roses are not tender in the same sense that coleus, for example, are tender. Rather, roses are tender because they are prone to grow with minimal prompting, and can withstand only so many checks to this growth. A good winter protection moderates freeze-and-thaw cycles, and keeps the rose from trying to grow too soon.

Rosarians who live in regions with early and reliable snow cover know that they need not cover their roses with anything else. I put a five-gallon bucket of sawdust over each rose. (Someone who heard this, and knew that I grew more than a thousand roses, once asked, “How do you find so many buckets?”) Sawdust is great because it is relatively light to carry, but quick to pack down around the rose without blowing away. In the spring, it can simply be raked into the bed. This is followed by an application of high-nitrogen granular fertilizer such as 20-10-10, which is more than enough to replace whatever nitrogen the decomposing sawdust consumes.

**Oak leaves also make a good winter mulch in Zone 6, if held in place with rabbit fencing or newspaper collars.** Maple and other softwood leaves make a gooey mess, and fresh manure will only burn or rot the rose canes you are trying to protect. If you choose to mound your roses with garden soil, it must be brought in from a different part of the garden. Scraping it up from between the roses will only expose tender roots, doing more harm than good.

Fitting directly over the rose plant, Styrofoam rose cones are a tested strategy for winter protection. They are especially effective in preventing desiccation caused by wind. But there are drawbacks to this approach. The rose must be cut back severely before



the cone will fit over it, mold can form inside the cone, and summer storage of the cones can be a problem if you have more than a few.

Microfoam blankets are an effective winter covering for bedding roses. The roses must still be cut back but not as severely as for use with rose cones. The biggest drawback with these blankets is that they create a comfy winter environment for rodents.

**The surest way to winter a tender rose in a harsh climate is to loosen its roots on one side, tip it over, and cover it with mounds of soil, bales of straw, or a temporary cold frame.** This “Minnesota Tip” method of

winter protection will bring just about any rose through a Zone 4 winter, and is necessary for very tender types, such as teas and Noisettes, in Zones 5 and 6. Unless you want to grow them in pots, it is the only practical way to get tree roses through the winter in the North.

While other marginal woody plants, such as magnolias, become more winter hardy as they get older and thicker, a ten-year-old rose is just as vulnerable as a two-year-old one. A ten-year-old climbing rose, however, will be much more spectacular than a two-year-old climber, and for this reason extraordinary measures, such as the Minnesota Tip, make most sense for roses that require height to be effective in the garden, or those that bloom only on old wood.

Once about every 50 years or so, someone comes up with the idea that bud-grafted roses can be made much more hardy if planted with the bud union four to six inches below the ground. The unstated goal of this plan is to make a budded plant into an own-root one. Over time this may happen, in which case you may wind up with a less vigorous version of your hybrid tea; if it does not establish on its own roots, you will be left with a very sad-looking rose that rarely puts out more than one cane. For the best results, cold-climate gardeners should plant budded roses with the bud union about one inch below the ground. Adding appropriate winter protection each year will guarantee a long life for your roses—even the ones you shouldn’t be growing. ♡

## Warding off winterkill

- **Never stop watering. Lack of water stresses roses, and stressed roses don't winter well.**
- **Avoid high-nitrogen fertilizers late in the season. Some rosarians recommend a no-nitrogen, high-potassium fertilizer late in the year. I agree with their reasons—it encourages root growth—but don't need the extra work it involves at this time of year.**
- **Leave spent flowers on the bush at the end of the season. This will hasten dormancy and slow any potential soft new growth.**