

ROOKIE ROSARIAN RIDDLES

The 3R's for beginners

A winter rosegarden has the appearance of abject neglect with its stark pattern of unsightly brambles as they absorb the meager rays of infrequent sunlight.... a sight unbecoming of the proud bearer of magnificent floral offerings just a few short weeks ago. It is the sight that brings us to the riddle for this time:

Q. - What can the rosarian do to help maintain the garden through the winter?

A. - The forlorn appearance of the garden is a perfect exemplification that things are not always as they seem. Within these brambles and beneath the mulch rests a latent force biding time while days and weeks elapse under nature's unpredictable intrigue. Eventually the day arrives when conditions exert the impetus for preordained schemes to react, releasing this force to perform its magic once again.

The rosarian has a minor, yet potentially eventful roll during this stage of abeyance. Nature's forces can be harsh as they are unleashed irregularly with periods of calm often followed by turbulent episodes. Tall plants, still with much of their foliage intact are susceptible to the aftereffects that high winds can cause in disrupting root systems, snapping off canes, or inflicting wounds to the stems from abrasion. This can lead to the entry of the spores of canker, a serious fungus disease more prevalent in winter while plants are resting. Topping the plants at this time of year to about chest height reduces the incidence of these type injuries while at the same time improves the overall aesthetic appeal of the garden.

Maintaining a two or three inch layer of mulch on the beds year round becomes especially important during the winter. Many roots are located near the soil surface and during sustained periods of sub-freezing temperatures the mulch deters the effects of frozen top soil, particularly as it relates to the plant's root zone. Most organic material is acceptable as a mulch as long as it is porous and does not contain meat by-products or weed seeds.

Rosebushes grown in our area require little extra winter protection to survive if they are healthy, disease-free plants. The USDA recently reclassified the plant hardiness zone for parts of our area from 7-B to 8-A including southern Mecklenburg and Union counties, and a portion of southern Gaston county. Like most everything else there are exceptions. Candidates for some measure of protection can include irreplaceable heirlooms, one-of-a-kind plants, and perhaps a variety or two known for their winter susceptibility in our area. First year plants grafted onto *Fortuniana* rootstock which is more fitting for the deep South need scrutiny when forecasts call for severe cold.

If protection is used, it should remain in place until the threat of freezing temperatures has passed: usually late March. Most cold weather damage occurs not from the freeze itself,

since many plants possess an internal form of antifreeze that can tolerate reasonable cold, but from late season extreme temperature fluctuations. It is not unusual in late winter for the readings to be in the 20s, climb into the 70s, and then back into the 20s or lower within the period of two or three days. The warmth, as the period approaches the start of the growing season, influences internal fluids (sap) to rise, usually being acted upon by direct sunlight striking the canes. The resultant rapid expansion and then contraction can cause the outer cane layers to split thus disrupting the internal capillary action followed by freeze injury. The damage usually appears low on newer basal or lateral growth of susceptible varieties when protection is removed prematurely.

Winter protection is not always effective, even in northern regions of the country where all-out defense measures are taken. Too many unpredictables are involved. It acts to assuage the perception of the rosarian that all is well much the same as an insurance policy that may or may not prove worthwhile. But I include myself in the company of many others that keep on hand extra compost, mulch, pine needles, or other material that can be used as protection should one deem its use warranted prior to the onset of a predicted severe winter storm.

Enjoy your roses!

Doug Whitt – Master Rosarian