

## Rose Care for March

In March, winter is finally coming to a close. Harbingers of spring - daffodils blooming, cherry and plum trees putting on a spectacular show, and deciduous plants begin bursting with new life – including loads of blemish-free green and mahogany-red foliage on roses. Along with this explosion of growth come the first unwanted visitors to the garden - spittlebugs and aphids. These pests are generally more unsightly than damaging. Just knock them off with a strong stream of water.

One step in keeping down the pest and disease population for the upcoming growing season is keeping your garden clean – get rid of the nooks and crannies that insect pests lay their eggs, or spores wait out the winter months. Be sure to pick up and dispose of any old, diseased leaves from last season. Rake up any remnants of pruning and pull errant weeds. If you have companion plants near your roses, trim them back so that you've got plenty of air circulation. Cutting perennials back hard and cleaning up around them further reduces those hiding places for unwanted marauders.

If you planted some new roses, be sure to keep the canes covered with mulch and moist until the plants are established. When we have a few dry weeks with warm daytime temperatures and low humidity, it can suck the moisture right out of the young plant, resulting in dry, shriveled canes.

It's not too late to do dormant spraying. If your plants haven't leafed out, you can use any type of horticultural oil. If you see even a hint of a leaf, use only a highly purified product, labeled as superior or ultrafine, with instructions that it is safe to use during spring and summer.

After I've done my major pruning, I like to go back a few weeks later and do a "fine-tuning"; there may be some wimpy canes that I missed or crossing branches that escaped detection. Or maybe that big, old shaggy gray cane that I passed up the first time, on closer inspection, really needs to come out to give room for some new growth. As long as you're just "tweaking" your pruning job, it won't set back your springtime bloom any.

Adding mulch is a good way to reduce future weeds, though it's best to wait until after the heavy rains of winter and early spring have let up. You don't want to be walking around wet soil compacting it. Apply about two to three inches on the soil around your roses. A good mulch will retain moisture, reduce weeds, and as it breaks down, provide some nutrients to the soil.

Roses don't need fertilizer now - in fact, if you fertilize too early, you're likely to just have the rain wash it away. Plants won't really begin to utilize the major components in chemical fertilizer until the soil warms a bit more.

By Nanette Londeree, Master Consulting Rosarian