

Tender Care

Tips and techniques for getting your tropical plants through the winter. Richard R. Iversen



Bringing your tender plants through the cold months doesn't necessarily require a greenhouse. If you are careful to match the plants to their preferred conditions, many are perfectly happy in frost-free garages, bulkheads, and basements.

AFTER LABOR DAY, it's time to begin making plans for next year's exotic garden. Evaluate what plants were successful this year, what ones you want back next year, and what should be discarded. For the plants you want back next year, determine which ones you'll purchase new in the spring and which ones will be overwintered in a frost-free environment. If certain species are readily available in garden centers, or if they are difficult to overwinter, it's simplest to purchase new plants in May. Attempt to overwinter those tropicals that are not readily available, those you want in larger sizes than are commonly available, and those that survive winter indoors without too much difficulty (in your frost-free garage, for example).

Some plants can overwinter indoors as whole plants, while others that root easily will overwinter as

pieces propagated from the original parent plant or perhaps simply as a seed. In USDA Zones 7 and 8, where soils don't freeze solid, some plants protected with a mulch will survive the winter outdoors, as a hardy perennial would. Your best horticultural judgments are needed to put the exotic garden to bed.

Slower-growing plants should be overwintered as whole plants in a frost-free indoor environment. Some can be treated as houseplants and receive artificial light. Others require sunlight either on a windowsill, in a plant room, or in a greenhouse. Some may be content in a cold but frost-free garage or basement with minimal light and water. They're the least bother to overwinter.

Wherever you place them, the plants first need to be dug and potted. Get clean pots and potting mix ready. Then begin to dig the plants. You'll be able to pace yourself, since it's not necessary to dig up the entire garden at once. On an overcast or misty day, when night temperatures begin to hover between 50°F and 55°F (about the middle or end of September in Zone 6), start to dig those plants that don't do well in cool night temperatures, like the acanthus *Pseuderanthemum atropurpureum* and *Graptophyllum pictum*.

You can pot up plants slowly and continue to enjoy the remaining garden until early October, maybe until Columbus Day. Bring houseplants indoors at least two weeks before you turn on your heat, so they can slowly acclimate to the dry-air interior environment. The plants that will overwinter in the garage, like New Zealand flax, can remain outdoors until November or the first predicted hard frost.

After plants are dug, you'll need to do some pruning. Remove broken leaves, branches, and roots; cut away oversize stems on rhizomatous plants like cannas; prune large banana leaves back to the main stem. However, most shrubby plants shouldn't be pruned severely until spring, when longer days return

and the renaissance of growth occurs. Terminal buds help to keep the stems alive during low-light winter conditions, so leave them on until spring. When they are removed, branching occurs.

Remove loose soil from the root mass and prune roots that are damaged or too large. I root-prune lantana and abutilon severely, with good results. Using a pot size about one inch wider than the diameter of the root mass, pot up the plants with the potting media. Water. Leave them outdoors in a shady environment to settle. Finally, spray plants that are prone to whiteflies, aphids, or spider mites with an insecticide or miticide before bringing them indoors.

With rhizomatous plants that will overwinter in a bareroot condition (like cannas and butterfly gingers), wait until the first frost knocks back their foliage before you remove them from the soil. Then fork up the one- to two-inch-thick and six-inch to 12-inch-long rhizomes. Don't divide the clumps until spring. Rinse away soil residues. Once dry, pack the rhizomes in a corrugated cardboard container pierced with air holes, a milk crate, or a wooden vegetable box. Fill dry vermiculite, perlite, peat moss, or excelsior around them. Store them until spring planting in a cool basement or garage at about 45°F to 55°F. Tuberous elephant's ears and caladium are treated in the same fashion. ♡



Plants being overwintered as houseplants

will respond best if they are first root pruned and re-potted. Cut away the old, damaged exterior roots with a sharp knife and repot in a container at least one inch wider than the root mass. Use fresh potting soil and water well to settle the root ball and reduce shock.

DIFFERENT PLANTS NEED DIFFERENT TREATMENTS

Propagate from cuttings (easy to root and fast growing)

Allamanda schottii
Alternanthera spp.
Cuphea ignea
Hemigraphis alternata
Iresine herbstii
Orthosiphon stamineus
Plectranthus argentatus
Sanchezia speciosa
Tradescantia pallida
 'Purple Heart'
T. zebrina

Overwinter as a houseplant

Acalypha hispida
Ananas comosus 'Variegatus'
Codiaeum variegatum var. *pictum*
Dracaena marginata 'Tricolor'
Ficus elastica
Livistona chinensis
Musa acuminata 'Dwarf Cavendish'
Pseuderanthemum atropurpureum
Sansevieria fasciata 'Laurentii'
Tradescantia spathacea

Overwinter in a cool garage

Brugmansia × candida
Cordyline indivisa
Cycas revoluta
Ensete ventricosum
Lantana camara
Nerium oleander
Phormium tenax
Plumbago auriculata
Punica granatum
Tecomaria capensis

Buy new in May

Abutilon pictum 'Thompsonii'
Clerodendrum thomsoniae
Crossandra infundibuliformis
Cuphea hyssopifolia
Cyperus alternifolius
Helichrysum petiolare
 'Limelight'
Hibiscus acetosella 'Red Shield'
Hypoestes phyllostachya
Mandevilla × amoena
 'Alice du Pont'
Passiflora coccinea