

Overwintering Plants

by Vicki Bruning

Winter can be tough on unprotected plants, with damage caused by temperature swings, shallow roots, and soil that's either too wet or too dry. Help potted perennials through winter by keeping them sheltered, grouped, and mulched.

The Big Picture

- Choose a pot that's big enough for the potting mix to protect the roots.
- Choose the right spot. Tuck pots into a sheltered area.
- Cluster pots close to each other to offer a little extra protection.
- Watch the water. Water pots sparingly until frozen. Stop watering once the soil freezes; plants won't need it then. Resume watering once temps stay above 40°F.
- Protect with loose mulch.
- Guard against critters. Use wire mesh or repellents if rodents or rabbits are a problem in your area.
- Plan for losses. Even with the best care, you might lose a plant or two, so don't get discouraged—it's part of gardening.

Which method works for you? Here are three easy ways to create a protected microclimate to help your plants survive. No matter which method you choose, check the pots once a month in winter and regularly in spring for insulation, critters and water needs.

1. Dry unheated garages, sheds, or greenhouses can protect plants from bitter cold, harsh winds, and heavy snow. Move containers inside shortly before or after a hard frost, but before the soil freezes. You don't have to wait until they're fully dormant or leafless. Pots can sit on the floor, be grouped in open bins, placed on shelves, or even nested pot-in-pot for extra insulation.
2. Another good spot for container groupings is on the ground along a north-facing wall, in a sheltered corner of your house, or beneath the low branches of a fir tree—anywhere protected from strong winds, harsh weather, temperature fluctuation, and intense sun. Once the ground freezes, cover the cluster with loose mulch, evergreen branches, or bagged leaves for extra insulation. Avoid the groupings on a raised

deck; the roots are exposed to freezing temperatures from all sides.

3. The last option is to dig a hole or trench in a protected spot with good drainage. After plants go dormant but before the soil freezes, usually a few weeks after the first frost—set pots side by side in the ground and pack soil around them. The earth acts as natural insulation, keeping roots from dropping below 32°F. Check on your plants through the winter, especially to be sure drainage is good. They may still need a little extra mulch for protection now and then. In spring, once the soil thaws and the worst cold has passed, lift the containers out—usually a few weeks before the last frost.

Keep Them Cozy and Safe

For plants stored outside, the best type of mulch depends on what's available and affordable. Loose materials like pine needles, bark, straw, compost, ever-green boughs, or bags of leaves work well because they allow for air circulation. This helps stabilize soil temperature and protects root systems and crowns. Avoid using loose, un-bagged leaves, since they can compact over winter, smother young spring shoots and rot roots if they stay too wet.

Always wait until plants go dormant before adding mulch—usually after the first hard frost in early to mid-November. Timing matters. Mulching too early can delay freezing, cause heaving and thawing, or prevent plants from going fully dormant.

Guard plants from rabbits, deer, mice, and other critters with metal screening or ¼-inch hardware cloth secured to the ground. Skip chicken wire since its holes are big enough for mice to squeeze through. For extra protection, place a dome or lid of wire to cover the top and sides and keep rodents from nibbling. We all know how sneaky they are!

Last Fall Reminder

Don't forget about your houseplants! Now is a good time to divide or repot them. Skip the fertilizer and let them rest as they adjust to shorter days and less sunshine.



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