



Preserving Potted Plants Through the Cold Season

The time has come when the days are getting shorter and the temperatures are slipping into fall sweater weather. The turning leaves on the trees are telling us winter will soon be here. And those may not be the only plants trying to tell us something. Whether you keep potted plants for a touch of color on your porch, have limited space and do all your gardening in pots, or just like to tend to indoor plants in winter to stay in touch with the green world, cold weather brings a new set of harsh conditions that require special attention for the potted plant gardener. Annuals are easy enough. Throw them away and buy new ones in the spring.

But if many of your potted plants are perennial, you will want to tend to them carefully with the approaching winter. Here are some helpful hints for caring for your plants with frigid weather just around the corner.

Outdoor Potted Gardens

The first choice you will have to make is whether you will try to maintain your potted plants outdoors or move them indoors. If you choose to do the latter, you can follow the advice we will cover later concerning tending to indoor plants through the cold season. But if you want to keep your potted plants outdoors over winter, there are measures you can take to increase the chance of healthy recovery come spring.

The USDA zone in which you live will have a lot to do with how much you will have to do to protect your plants. Essentially, the colder the region, the more protective measures you will want to take. The most fragile part of your plant is the roots, and younger roots are more likely to be damaged than established roots.

Choosing plants that are rated for two hardiness zones colder than where you live is a good way to ensure root survival. Be sure to plant them with enough time for your roots to “harden” before the cold weather strikes. As a rule of thumb, when nighttime temperatures reach 50 degrees fahrenheit and below, it’s time to start taking protective measures.

Depending on where you live, the type of pot in which you keep your plants can have an impact on cold-weather hardiness. Porous containers such as terra cotta are more likely to absorb water, freeze, and crack, unnecessarily exposing root balls to the elements. If you like using porous containers, you can avoid exposure by painting the insides with pool paint.

Another method is to line the bottom with insulating pieces of foam. Wood, metal, plastic, resin, or even concrete containers may withstand extremes of temperatures better and keep plant roots safer.

Whatever containers you choose, the challenge of keeping potted plants safe outdoors in winter means helping them withstand shifts in temperature, wind, drying out, and harsh sun. One important measure is to remove potted plants from concrete surfaces. Concrete absorbs sun during the day causing pots to warm. At night cold temperatures are likely to cause pots to freeze. It is actually these dramatic shifts in temperature that most stress plant roots and cause them to atrophy.

If possible, move your plants to earthen surfaces where temperatures remain more constant. If you can’t do this, consider placing your plants in a larger vessel such as a tub, pool liner, or even a much larger pot and filling it with soil, straw, leaves, or other insulative materials. In areas susceptible to extreme cold, you might consider planting your pots in the ground for the winter.

It’s also a good idea to protect your plants against harsh weather conditions by placing them in groups with the most weather resilient varieties on the outside. This not only helps protect against cold, but also shields them from harsh winds. Place them in more shaded areas as harsh sunlight can create the same temperature swings described for plants left on concrete surfaces.

Indoor Care of Potted Plants

If you choose to move your potted garden inside for the winter, there are still care considerations you will have to maintain. Even inside, your plants can be susceptible to cold, so it is a good idea to keep them away from drafty windows and doors.

That being said, they will still need sunlight. Try to find an area in your home where the temperature is more constant and where light is readily available. If you can’t provide enough sunlight, using a full spectrum bulb in a lamp that you focus directly on your plants for at least 12 hours a day should provide them with the light they need to stay healthy.

A lack of humidity is also a concern for keeping plants indoors in winter. Just as we feel the dry conditions caused by dryer air and heating, plants too are stressed in such environments. You might consider running a vaporizer in rooms where you keep your plants or moving them to moister areas such as bathrooms or kitchens.

Another way to maintain humidity is to place plants on a bed of rocks in a large tray. Keep water in the tray up to the level of the rocks but not touching the bottoms of your pots.

Finally, keep plants watered (not as much as during growth seasons, but enough for soil to stay moist), prune out dead leaves and other debris, and occasionally spray leaves down in a sink or with a spritzer to keep leaves clean and promote photosynthesis.

With a little protective care, your potted plants should stay healthy over the winter months. Some may lose foliage or even die down to ground level, but if you've protected the roots, they should be ready to put back in the yard come spring.

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