

How-To

Bring It In!

Overwintering tender plants doesn't need to be difficult

By Irvin Etienne Fine Gardening - Issue 184

Tropical plants are a major part of my home garden. It requires effort to lift them every fall and replant them in spring, but it's worth it to have a taste of the tropics here in the land of cornfields. Since I do not have a greenhouse, all of my tropicals must either tolerate life as houseplants or go dormant to make it through the winter.

Some questions need to be asked as the frosts of fall approach: What gets dug up? Do I save all the cannas, or just the ones that are hard to find? What can handle a frost? The more frost tolerant a plant is, the later it gets dug up. To help you decide which plants to save, consider rarity, sentimental attachment, and, of course, beauty. If you question whether you can find it again, or it is pricey, try to save it. You'll also want to save the dahlia Aunt Clarice gave you right before she had to give up gardening. She can't give you another, and it's not the same to buy a new one online. And if you really love a plant, try to keep it. With a bit of luck it will grow larger next year; as a bonus, you may be able to divide it.

Once you decide to save a plant, you then have to decide how to overwinter it. Does it need to be kept growing, or can it be allowed to go dormant? I'll provide some ideas of how to do both.

None of the overwintering methods covered here come with a guarantee that every plant will survive every winter. Think of this as an experiment, and try to be OK with the idea that some plants will die. I tell plants two things when they come in for the winter: "Live or die, it's your choice," and "If you die, I can replace you with something newer and prettier." In reality I may not be so carefree, but the plants don't need to know that. Here are my tips for giving your plants the best chance at survival.

Keeping a plant growing is your surest bet

Some tropical plants are damaged at 40°F, and a hard frost might kill them. These should be the first ones dug up in autumn, and they will need to be kept growing indoors to survive winter. Like most people, I can't provide perfect growing conditions for the plants I bring inside. A plant that prefers a south window may have to endure a north window. Nobody will be getting tropical temperatures, so my home's typical winter temperatures must suffice. I do not

try for perfect plants; my goal is for them to survive. If you wish to strive for better, you have my blessing.

Basic prep

- Simply dig up the plants you want to save, and pot them using barely moist soil. Take only as much root ball as necessary, and prune back the top as needed to fit your available space.
- Check weekly to see if the plants need water. Avoid overwatering, as overly wet soil will cause rot.

Plants this works best for

This method works for a host of plants too numerous to list. If you're not sure a plant can go dormant during the winter, try turning it into a temporary houseplant. Here are a few examples:

1. Philodendrons (Philodendron spp. and cvs., Zones 11–14)
2. Dracaenas (Dracaena spp. and cvs., Zones 11–15)
3. Cordylines (Cordyline spp. and cvs., Zones 9–11)
4. Agaves (Agave spp. and cvs., Zones 9–15)
5. Mangaves (Mangave cvs., Zones 9–11)
6. Begonias (Begonia spp. and cvs., Zones 12–13)

Dormant plants are easy to care for and take up less space

I actually prefer tropicals that can go dormant over the winter. These plants can be stored in a cool, dark place; the main thing is to keep them from freezing. Once they are put away, you can essentially ignore them until spring. However, it is a good idea to check your plants at least once a month and to give them a small amount of water if they are bone dry. If a plant is stored in an open plastic bag, the monthly check also offers a chance to open that bag wider if the plant is too wet. If some plants push growth when they are supposed to be dormant, don't worry about it. This is normal, since we cannot provide the ideal temperature and moisture conditions for perfect dormancy. Think of it as having a jump-start on spring.

Before digging up plants that will be stored dormant, allow them to be hit by frost at least once; this will help to ease them into their dormant state. Then

remove all remaining foliage, and most of the soil from their roots, regardless of how they will be stored.

Basic prep for dormant storage

Dig up plants late in the season. The best time to dig is after the first frost. Get as much of the root ball as you can, and try not to damage the crown.

Cut off all leaves. Trim stems to about ½ to ¾ inch above the soil line. For plants like bananas with large trunklike stems, trim the leaves back to the stem.

Remove most of the soil from the roots. It isn't necessary to clean off every last bit of soil, just enough to make the root ball compact and easy to handle.

Method 1: Store fleshy roots in wood shavings

The rhizomes or tubers of some plants can be stored in wood shavings. This method takes up very little space and is a good solution for plants with fleshy, durable roots. Allow the roots to dry for a few days before storing.

Use a plastic storage tote. Line the bottom with a layer of wood shavings, sold as animal bedding at pet stores and farm supply stores. Add a layer of roots, spaced so they are not touching.

Top with more shavings. Do not put the lid of the container on, as this will trap moisture and cause rot. Cardboard boxes or nursery pots can also be used for this type of storage.

Plants this works best for

1. Cannas (Canna spp. and cvs., Zones 8–11)
2. Dahlias (Dahlia spp. and cvs., Zones 8–11)
3. Caladiums (Caladium spp. and cvs., Zones 9–11)

Method 2: Cut back the top and pot it up

I like to pot up certain plants. Compared to bagging, this method can give smaller plants a better chance at surviving dormancy. However, this method is a bit more time consuming, and the plants will be heavier and harder to move.

Pot them up and keep them cool. After removing most of the soil, place the root ball in a pot just big enough to hold it. Add enough slightly moist potting soil to cover the roots. Then store in a cool, dark place. Check the plants monthly while they are in storage; angels' trumpets are the most likely to need water occasionally through winter.

Plants this works best for

1. Angels' trumpets (*Brugmansia* spp. and cvs., Zones 9–11)
2. Small bananas (*Musa* spp. and cvs., Zones 8–11, *Musella lasiocarpa*, Zones 8–11, *Ensete* spp., Zones 9–11)
3. Alocasias (*Alocasia* cvs., Zones 10–11)
4. 'Stuttgart' canna (*Canna* 'Stuttgart', Zones 8–11)
5. Canna rhizomes (*Canna* spp. and cvs., Zones 8–11) that you'd like to give a better chance at survival
6. Xanthosomas (*Xanthosoma* cvs., Zones 10–11)

Method 3: Store them in plastic bags

I have a lot of plants to store and limited space, so my go-to method for many plants is to drop them into plastic bags and store them in a cool, dark spot.

Certain larger plants I simply prepare as if I were potting them up, then I drop them into open plastic bags. I allow other plants to dry for about a week, after which I store them in tied plastic bags.

By experimenting over the years, I have discovered that many plants are less demanding than I thought. For example, my colocasia have had a 100% survival rate when stored in tied plastic bags.

Tip: Don't forget to label! You think that you'll remember, but trust me, you will forget everything by next spring. Use flagging tape (sold in home centers and hardware stores) and a permanent marker to create labels that can be tied easily onto individual plants.

Open plastic bags

Certain plants are best stored in open plastic bags.

For bananas and similar plants with large, trunklike stems, cut the leaves back to the stem and remove most of the soil from the roots.

Tip each plant upside

down. This removes water held in the leaf sheaths. You may be surprised by how much water comes out! This is an important step, since all that extra water can cause rot.

Loosely gather the top edge

of the bag. Tie the bag shut, leaving enough of an opening to allow excess moisture to evaporate. Check the bag monthly while it is in storage, and adjust the opening size if the plant seems too wet or too dry.

Open plastic bags work best for

1. Large bananas (*Musa* spp. and cvs., Zones 8–11, *Musella lasiocarpa*, Zones 8–11, *Ensete* spp., Zones 9–11)
2. Large canna clumps (*Canna* spp. and cvs., Zones 8–11)
3. Large alocasias (*Alocasia* cvs., Zones 10–11)
4. Ginger lilies (*Hedychium* spp. and cvs., Zones 7–11)
5. Setcreasas (*Tradescantia pallida* 'Purpurea', Zones 8–11)

Tied plastic bags

Plants that will be stored in closed plastic bags should be allowed to dry out for about a week. Too much moisture encourages decay, so be sure your plants are good and dry before tying the bags shut.

Give each plant its own bag. Lightweight plastic shopping bags or trash bags work well. Label each plant, place it in a bag, and tie the top closed.

Tied plastic bags work best for

1. Colocasias (*Colocasia* spp. and cvs., Zones 8–11)
2. Flowering maples (*Abutilon* spp. and cvs., Zones 8–11)
3. Lantanas (*Lantana* spp. and cvs., Zones 9–11)
4. Zonal geranium

Division of Root Mass for Angelonia

To propagate by root division, dig up and cut apart the root mass into clumps of roots in late summer. Plant the root clumps into 1-gallon containers and keep them indoors during the winter in a warm, sunny area. When the angelonia plants cease flowering, cut the plants back by half and water only after the soil has gone completely dry. The root clumps can be replanted in your garden after the last spring frost the following year.

Impatiens tinctoria has a similar type of root structure somewhat like a Dahlia, it has survived in sheltered gardens in Scotland.

Dormant Bare Root Storage for Geraniums

This is a popular method that has been done for generations. You'll need a garage, shed, cold cellar, or unheated basement that does not dip below freezing or go beyond 45°F.

We call it 'bare root' storage because the plant is removed from the soil, pruned, and placed in cool storage. Pelargoniums can handle this because of their thick, succulent roots, which survive so long as they do not dry out or become diseased.

Here's what you do.

Label Your Plants by Color

- First, plan to label your plants if you want to keep track of the flower colors.
 - You could store them in groups by color or place tags (loosely) around their roots.
 - I write the details on little strips of cardstock and staple it like a wristband around the stems.

Dig Up or Unpot

- Gently shake off all loose soil.
- You can air dry the plant for a few days and then shake off more soil.

Storage

Whatever you do, you don't want the plants to get damp or sit on moisture because they are prone to mold.

You do, however need to keep them watered, and not allow them to dry out (they'll die).

There are several options:

- Suspend the plants from ceiling hooks.
- Place in [paper bags](#) and hang from hooks or set on shelf.
- Wrap in newspaper and sit on shelf.
- Place in cardboard box.

As far as I can tell, the advice to always hang the plants upside-down for better results seems to be a wives' tale.

Winter & Spring Care

- Check on your plants every week or two. I put a reminder in my computer calendar.
- The plants should remain firm, not withered or unhealthy looking.
- Remove any mold, black parts, or dead matter.
- Soak in warm water for one to two hours each month.
- Allow to dry before returning to bags, newspaper, or box.

Six Weeks Before Last Frost

Reviving Dormant Geraniums

- Prune as needed and remove any excessively long roots.
- Pot in moist potting mix, burying the plant two leaf nodes deep (these will form roots).
- Gradually re-introduce to light.
- New growth should appear in 1-2 weeks.
- Gradually introduce to life (harden) outdoors in anticipation of last frost.

Don't toss those tuberous begonias - save for next summer

CORVALLIS - Many people enjoy the lush blossoms of tuberous begonias in pots on patios and as outdoor hanging plants. There's no need to throw them away when cold weather hits and the tops die. The tubers can be saved over the winter and planted again the next spring for another year of showy color.

Take the following steps to save your potted tuberous begonia tubers:

1. Remove plant from pot before hard frosts occur. Cut back most of the top of the plant, leaving the ball of roots and soil intact.
2. Place in a dry, cool storage area (a basement or garage) and allow the tubers to cure for several weeks.

3. After curing, shake off the soil and remove the remaining stalks and roots. Any stalk or root left has the potential to rot and spread to the tuber. Put them on screen trays or pack them in dry peat, sawdust, sand or other insulating material.
4. Store tubers in a dry, dark, cool (above freezing) area.
5. In the spring, start begonia plants by placing the tubers on damp peat moss in a warm environment. When roots and tops have started, plant them in pots in rich, well drained potting soil. Bring outdoors when all danger of frost is past.

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