Homes & Gardens

Town Tribune Weekly Guide To Fall Living

This Is the Right Way to Protect Outdoor Planters From Winter Damage So They Don't Shatter in the Cold

Gardening season is winding down, so you'll soon have to figure out what to do with all your outdoor potted plants.

Before it gets too cold, make a plan to bring houseplants indoors for winter and protect shrubs, perennials, and other container plants so that they survive through to the spring.

Here's how you can start prepping planters and pots in the fall for winter weather.

How to Prep Planters for Winter:

Begin by inventorying the container plants you've kept outdoors. You may have houseplants that have been soaking up summer sun, containerized trees and shrubs that stay outside permanently, or potted perennials you haven't gotten into the ground yet.

Because the roots of container plants aren't insulated by soil, they can be damaged much more easily by cold than in-ground plantings.

In many cases, shrubs and dwarf trees in small pots can stay put, as long as they're winter hardy in your growing zone. If you have the space and your pots aren't too heavy to move, plantings like these can be protected in an unheated shed, garage, or basement.

However, many plants require a certain number of days of exposure to cold weather to grow properly the following year, so any indoor space shouldn't be too warm. Temperatures in the protected storage space should range between 20°F and 45°F.

If you don't have an unheated indoor space to store container perennials, consider burying them in the ground in their pots, then digging them up in spring. Ensure that the rim of buried containers is flush with the soil line, not below it, to prevent excess water from collecting.

Buried container plants will need minimal watering since they'll drain more slowly when surrounded by soil. Once they're buried, mulch the pots with several inches of dried leaves, straw, or salt hay to further protect them from the cold.

An alternative to burying potted plants is grouping them together near a wall to keep them warm, then insulating the mass of pots with mulch or row cover.

Potted perennials like flowering plants, grasses, and shrubs that you intend to plant in the ground eventually will also need special treatment over winter.

If possible, consider planting native perennials in their intended site in the ground in fall, once the plants have gone dormant but before the soil freezes. They'll be established once active growth returns in spring.

When to Bring Plants Indoors for Winter:

Start prepping your container plants for winter at least a few weeks before you expect the cold weather to arrive.

Having a plan for which pots will come indoors, which will stay outside, and how you'll protect them will make the process go much more smoothly when the time comes—and help ensure that all of your plants will make it through the winter.

Many popular houseplants, including tropicals and succulents, will need to be brought indoors for winter before temperatures drop below 50°F. Extended exposure to temperatures below this point can severely damage foliage or even kill these tender plants.

The same goes for ornamental tropicals like mandevilla, gardenia, and hibiscus. If you live in zone 8 or colder, these plants will need to spend the winter in a warm place indoors, with plenty of light from a bright, sunny window or grow light.

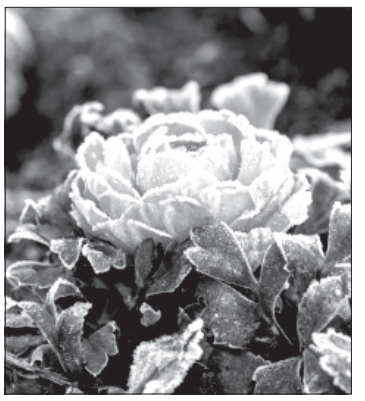
Potted perennials should be brought indoors, insulated, or buried in their pots in the ground within a couple of weeks after the first frost in your area, but before the ground freezes.

This allows them to go dormant before the change in their environment.

4 Tips for Prepping Planters and Pots for Winter:

- Inventory outdoor container plants. Before it gets too cold, make a list of the plants you'll need to prepare for winter, considering factors like hardiness zone, available heated and unheated indoor storage space, and time and materials needed to insulate or bury outdoor containers.
- Consider swapping, selling, or giving away plants. Fall is a great time to let go of plants that are no longer bringing you joy, especially if you're tight on overwintering space.
- Keep an eye on the weather forecast. As temperatures cool in your region, check the extended forecast and look for nights below 50°F. Even if it's not quite time to bring plants in yet, you can shelter or cover them when temperatures dip.
- Start adjusting light levels. Once you have an idea of when you want to bring in houseplants and other tropicals that will continue growing through winter rather than going dormant, begin weaning them off of bright outdoor light by moving them into a shady area for a week or two before they come inside.

Should You Keep Watering Your Garden After the First Frost?



As we ease into autumn and winter, you wonder if your final days of gardening maintenance are near. It's a reasonable question, and many gardening pros will tell you that most garden tasks need to stop once the first frost arrives.

However, we were curious to know if this includes watering. We tagged in a pro for his insights, and we were surprised by his answer—here's what it was.

Should You Continue Watering Your Garden After the First Frost?

According to gardening expert John Cho, the concern over when to stop watering your garden ahead of winter is something many gardeners share.

And while frost certainly plays a role in when to adjust your schedule, it's probably not in the way you think; the idea of stopping watering your garden after the first frost is actually linked to a very common gardening misconception.

"A lot of gardeners assume the first frost means plants are completely done for the season, but what they may not realize is that the roots underground are still very much alive," Cho says.

In fact, he says you should keep an eye on when frost is on its way because there are benefits to when and how you water around this common sign that winter is coming.

When to Stop Watering Plants in Fall/Winter:

Rather than stopping after the very first frost, Cho says you should actually keep watering your plants until the ground is frozen solid. In fact, for cold-tolerant plants, watering through early frosts is actually advised.

"Watering can help maintain cold-tolerant plants because moist soil acts like insulation around the root zone," Cho explains.

As he explains, the first frost is usually not cold enough to affect damp soil because it retains heat better than dry soil. This is why you should keep an eye on when the first frost is coming—not because you'll need to stop watering.

"It would actually be ideal to water plants ahead of any frost, so gardeners should keep a close eye on the first frost date," Cho says.

3 Signs Your Plants Need More Water in Fall:

Of course, you also don't want to over-water your plants, either. Frost or no frost, look out for clear signs your garden might need an autumnal drink. These may include:

- Wilting leaves and early leaf drop
- Browning leaf tips that seem crispy or dry
- Dry soil for the top inch or two

As you're considering your watering schedule for the fall, how you water your plants is also important. This is always true, of course, but there are particular things to consider in cold weather.

"Make sure you water the soil directly and not the foliage," Cho says. "Getting water on the leaves right before a freeze can actually damage the plant."



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