

Overwintering Tender Annuals and Houseplants

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December 7, 2012



Bring them indoors to enjoy again next year

The change of seasons in our yards and gardens is also time to transition our houseplants and tender annuals to their new season of drier air and reduced indoor light. Here are a few strategies for overwintering your tender annuals and houseplants.

Humidity

As we bump up the heat in our homes in the fall, the air becomes drier, and indoor houseplants need more moisture. Under or over watering can become a problem. This can be easily avoided by placing the plant container

- in a large bowl or tray with pebbles or gravel
- in a plant dish with raised ribs on the surface
- in long gravel filled trays that accommodate several plants
- in a terrarium or Wardian case (an early version of the terrarium)
- on a capillary mat (a self-watering system) in a sturdy leak-proof tray

Keep the pot above the water level to avoid soil saturation and root rot. Symptoms of this are yellowing leaves. Exposure to cold air or insufficient light can also cause yellowed leaves. Most plants are in a resting, or dormant, phase in winter brought on by lower light levels. They need less water, and that is best accomplished by watering from the bottom of the pot. African violets respond well to this type of watering as their leaves do not like to be wet. Plants will appreciate the added humidity as they consume less water, especially those near heat sources and drafty windows. Exceptions are succulents and cacti that thrive on dry environments.

All of these suggestions contribute to more humidity in our homes that our chapped lips and sinuses will benefit from as well. Protect furniture surfaces from water damage by using either cork or tile disks under saucers.

If fungus gnats are flying around the soil, a likely cause is too much watering. A mulch of fine washed gravel, grit or fancy pea gravel on the soil surface will discourage the gnats.

Re-potting Your Plant

Check the plant's roots. If you cannot see any soil, or there are roots coming out of the bottom of the pot, it is time to re-pot using a soilless potting mix. Garden soil is too heavy and should be avoided as roots will have a difficult time to growing in it. Cut back the roots, or re-pot into a larger container no greater than 1-inch in diameter than the original pot. Gently loosen compacted roots before re-potting. Plant the base of the plant ½-inch to 1-inch below the rim so that when watered from the top, the water will not spill over the rim. After re-potting, give the pot a tap to gently settle the soil, taking care not to pack too tightly.

Bringing in plants from a summer outdoors can also invite some unexpected visitors. Aphids, whiteflies and scale can ride in undetected in the soil only to appear after a few weeks to infect neighboring plants as well. This is another good reason to re-pot in the fall to ensure good indoor plant health.



Left: Geraniums can take the strong sunlight from a south facing window, just don't let the leaves touch the glass. If the plant gets leggy, pinch it back and enjoy blooms all winter. **Middle:** Abutilon, or flowering maple, is a member of the *Malvaceae* or mallow family. Planted in a large container, its blossoms will attract hummingbirds to your patio all summer, but bring it inside before the first heavy frost. **Right:** Bring your Boston fern inside for the winter. Keep it in bright spot, but not in direct sunlight. Water your fern when the soil feels dry to the touch and mist it with room-temperature water several times a week. By May it will be ready to go back outside. *Photos by Christine Farrow/Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Cooler Temperatures

An ideal location for wintering over your plants would be a heated sun porch, a sunny guest room or garage. Temperatures can be as low as 50° F. in winter when plants are inactive. However, many plants can survive much lower temperatures than recommended. Warmer temperatures can stimulate growth that plants cannot support in winter months.

Do Not Fertilize

Because plant growth slows during dormancy, plants will not consume fertilizer and can burn if fertilized during this time. The exception would be flowering plants not in bloom that welcome monthly diluted feedings (less than half the recommended amount listed on the label). Salts can build up in the soil affecting the intake of water and nutrients that can lead to plant collapse

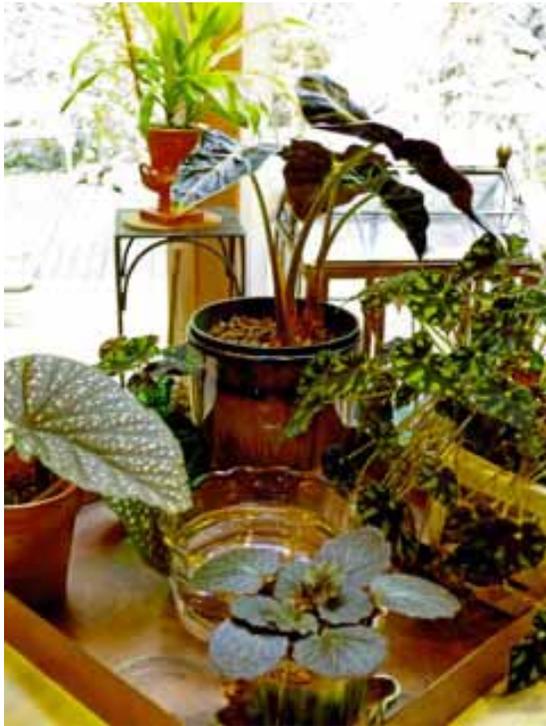
Light

Rotate plants weekly for uniform light exposure. Use full spectrum lights to supplement plants needing higher light levels. Be aware that patterned glass can also magnify the sun's intensity to plants placed behind it.

According to *The Complete Houseplant Bible*, a good way to test light levels is to try reading the newspaper at the location where you intend to place your plant. If you cannot read the print comfortably, find another site for your plant.

Plants that do well in poor light include ferns, mosses, ivy, most philodendrons, palms and sansevieria.

Tender succulents, geraniums and flowering maples (abutilons) are ideal for strong light as are herbs, such as basil, rosemary and oregano.



Left: For indoor plants with similar light and moisture, a microclimate will keep them healthier and their care easier. It can be as simple as placing a bowl of water nearby allowing the plants to take advantage of the evaporating water. This does not replace watering the plants individually **Right:** The African violet loves a warm humid environment, but will not tolerate wet leaves or overly wet soil. Placing the plant on a shallow dish of pebbles will allow the plant to take up water from the bottom and keep the leaves dry.
Photos by Christine Farrow/Skagit County Master Gardeners.

Using Leaf Shine

Very few flowering plants will tolerate leaf shine (various commercial or homemade products for cleaning leaves) as this can burn the leaves or clog their pores by the oils it contains. Wiping larger leaves on both sides with a sponge or damp cloth discourages insects and helps to remove dust. Spraying with soft warm water is sometimes enough to accomplish this; the exception is African violets which do not like wet leaves.

Tender Annuals

Geraniums: These plants benefit from cutting back (good time to make cuttings for the spring). They tend to get "leggy" in late winter and another cutback will ensure lush spring foliage.

Fuchsias: These lovely plants benefit by being cut back to 6" and storing in a cool, dry frost-free place. Take some cuttings to propagate, and you may have more in the spring.

Begonias: Fancy leaved Rex begonias should be brought in by mid-September as they cannot tolerate any cold weather. Bonfire begonias can be stored in a dark, dry, frost-free area and allowed to die back and rest all winter. Look for growth in early April and begin light watering. Tuberous

begonias can be lifted and stored in a cool, dry, frost-free location until "waking up" in late January-February. If they display pale pink nubs, pot them up and place them in full sun. Rotate the pot for even sun exposure. Keep in mind that winter sun is much weaker than summer sun.

Hibiscus: Recommendations range from treating them as annuals, to wintering them over. Expect lots of leaf drop. Be vigilant for white flies that can be washed off. Check the leaf undersides for evidence of more insects. There will be fewer blooms as well, because the plants are resting

Cannas: Most will not survive outdoors unless in a protected sunny position, so lift, cut back, and check them periodically for dryness with an occasional sprinkle of water. Keep them in a dry, frost-free location (next to the fuchsias).

Detailed descriptions of several other tender plants can be found at Margaret Roach's online blog, < <http://www.awaytogarden.com/>>, September 25, 2009.

With a bit of planning, we can help our tender annuals and houseplants ease into and thrive in their new season.

RESOURCES:

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