

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Many of us have trees and shrubs displayed in containers on our patios or decks, and because these plants live many years, they need protection from freezing temperatures.

Once the days shorten and temperatures begin to drop, plants begin their necessary period of dormancy. Deciduous plants lose their leaves, and of all plants internal systems slow down into something like a resting period. The plants use this time to build cellular structures for buds and root growth needed the following spring. Winter chill, the term that describes temperatures between 32 and 45 degrees, is cold, but not necessarily damaging to plant structures. It is when temperatures go below 32 degrees (freezing) that all container plants can be at risk if not protected.

Usually container shrubs and trees have less soil around their roots to insulate them. It is possible to have less than 2 inches of soil between roots and the outside of the container unlike plants in the ground. If you don't take action, these roots will freeze and the plant may die.

An occasional night below 32 degrees will not damage plants if temperatures warm to 32 degrees or above during the day. However, temperatures that stay below freezing for several days or weeks can spell death to any unprotected plant.

There are several easy solutions for caring for your plants. If possible, move them into a garage, shed or other unheated area. Light is not essential at this time, and plants do not need to be watered other than making sure they do not dry out.

If plants cannot be moved, wrap the entire container (the bottom too) with an insulation material. Several inexpensive options are available. Bubble wrap wrapped around in several layers, or foam sheets used for sleeping pads (approximately 1 inch thick) are easy to bend and fold around containers, and work well in our wet climate. Even thick layers of newspapers held with strong tape, and carefully protected with plastic, will work. Keeping the newspaper dry is the important detail.

Other suggestions are to use quilt batting purchased from fabric stores. Quilt batting comes in 1-inch thickness, and is sold by the yard and in varying widths. Even an old blanket wrapped snugly around the container to protect the soil works well. In all cases, remember to wrap the entire container, sides and bottom, and consider a layer of plastic over the insulating material if it is likely to get wet.

Using containers that resist freezing weather and insulating your shrubs and trees will insure that you enjoy these plants for years.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.