

ASK THE MASTER GARDENER

As fall descends on the garden, you may begin to wonder, “Is there a way to over-winter my fuchsias?” And the answer, of course, is a Yes!” In fact there are several methods fuchsia growers use to do that. But the first thing any fuchsia grower needs to ascertain before doing anything is whether their plant is classified as hardy or semi-hardy.

Fuchsias are deciduous. And most “hardy bush” fuchsias can be left in the ground all winter long with very little extra precaution taken other than putting three to six inches of good mulch around the crown. Many of these hardier bush fuchsias can readily be identified by their very small thin flowers (thinner than a pencil), or if the bush has already survived at least one winter than all you probably need to do is mulch them as suggested.

However, if your bush fuchsia is a new addition to the garden and especially if it’s one of the newer, larger flowering types which are quite often only semi-hardy, then you need to find out specifically how hardy it is. If it still has its original tag on it, check it for its hardiness rating. If it doesn’t say, then call the nursery where purchased and have them look it up for you in one of their reference books.

All first year deciduous bushes need a few extra precautions taken to help them survive their first winter and a fuchsia is no exception. If your plant is new, or one of those classified as being only semi-hardy then you need to take these extra precautions. In early fall when the leaves begin to fall, stop fertilizing and stop picking off the spent flowers and berries, which signals the plant to stop growing. They will not survive if their roots get frozen, therefore mulch them heavily. Six inches of mulch on a new plant is a minimum, twelve is much better. Use leaves, straw, compost, or some form of wood chip as mulch, but spread it not just over the plant’s crown, but also out over an area at least twice as large as the rootball. You can prune them lightly if you are in a high wind area to prevent breakage of branches, but in most cases that’s not necessary. If an early hard frost causes the branches to freeze back don’t cut them out until new growth starts again in the spring. You’ll probably want to do a little shaping and pruning in the spring anyway as fuchsias only flower on new growth.

Most trailing fuchsias that are sold each spring for hanging baskets are not hardy. Therefore, the gardener should plan on taking them indoors for the winter as their pots will not protect the roots from freezing. So in mid-September discontinue fertilizing and begin to water more sparingly. Just before the first frost bring the plants into a frost-free garage, shed, or greenhouse. To keep the plant dormant through the winter the temperature should be kept between 40 and 55 degrees F. Prepare plants for storage by pruning branches back to the edge of the pot or no longer than 6 inches and eliminate any spindly growth. Cut just above a node where a leaf bud has been or above a branch. Treat the plant at this time to kill any insects that might be in the soil. The plant does not need leaves or light during dormancy, so remove the leaves. This will also tend to eliminate any pests such as aphid and whitefly that may also be trying to over-winter on the plant. Check the plants every few weeks, keeping the soil barely moist in order to keep the roots alive, but definitely not soggy, and watch out for mildew and treat it if it occurs.

Some fuchsia growers who don't have access to a frost-free facility have had some success when they have completely removed their plants from a hanging basket, have trimmed them back, labeled them and have stored them in a garbage can for the winter. If attempting to use this method, surround the individual plants in the can with sufficient sawdust, shavings, or leaves to insulate them six to eight inches all around. After layering plants with the protective material clear to the top of the can, cover the can securely. Open the can in the spring after all frost danger is past, prune and repot. Other growers have stored their plants in the crawl space under their house, but that necessitates having to crawl under there every other week or so to water them and check for bugs.

In mid to late April, start to pull back the mulch from around your bush fuchsias. If you see new growth, go ahead and pull it all the way off. If no new shoots, wait and check in a week. When new growth appears on the old woody growth, prune them back to about 6 inches. Also prune out weak and dead growth. When the new growth is approximately 2 inches long, start feeding the plant with a weak solution of 20-20-20 over the rooting area, but not up against the stem.

In March, start checking for new growth on your trailing fuchsias stored in the garage. When you find that first initial growth remove the plant from its pot, root prune to keep top and roots in balance. Remove all old soil that comes off easily and repot in a fresh soil mix. As additional new growth begins appearing, be sure the plants get good light to prevent spindly growth and again start feeding with a weak fertilizer solution. Take them outdoors in the daytime if temperatures are mild and back inside at night for best growth. Don't start leaving them out overnight until the nighttime temperature remains close to 50 degrees. Pinch the new growth at the tips to make a bushy plant until you are ready for blooms to form. It'll take another 6 to 8 weeks before any single type blooms will appear, and an extra couple of weeks for doubles. Then enjoy your plants for another season.

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