

Overwintering Container Plants

By Jessamyn Tuttle
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A house full of greenery

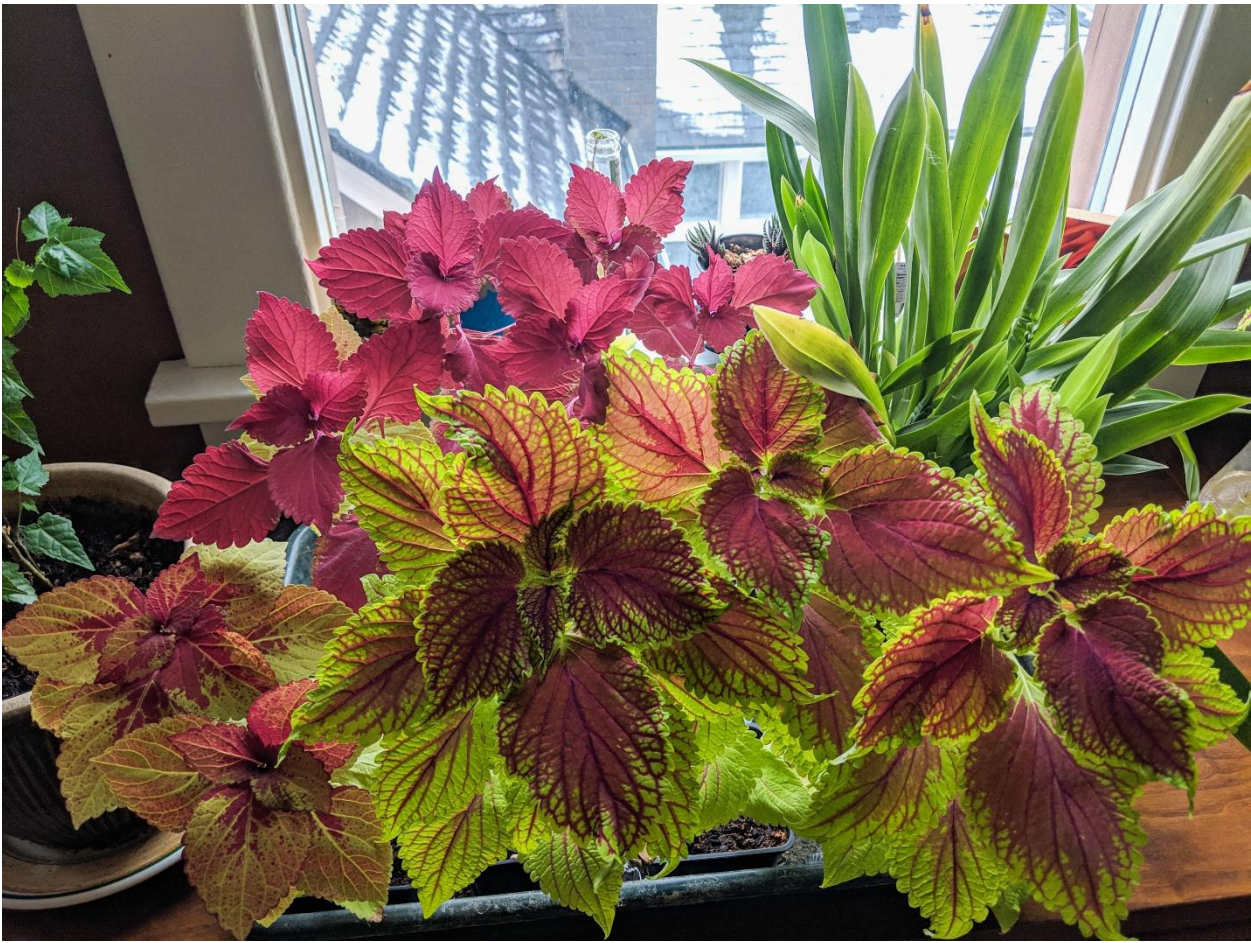
Plants enjoy a summer spent outside just as much as people do, but as winter begins to settle in, gardeners face having to decide whether to leave all their container plants outdoors to fend for themselves or bring them inside. Depending on how many plants you have, preparing them all for overwintering can be a substantial task.

The first thing to figure out is whether a plant needs or wants to be inside for the winter. Most common houseplants are native to the tropics and cannot tolerate cool temperatures. While they enjoy a summer vacation outdoors, plants like peace lily, prayer plant, *Hoya*, spider plant, Boston fern, and African violet need to be brought inside well before frosts begin, ideally when temperatures first start dropping below 50°F at night. Some tender perennials like *Cymbidium* orchids, Pelargoniums or Fuchsias can be perfectly fine staying out until temperatures begin to approach freezing, while hardy perennials in containers might be fine staying outside all winter long (assuming they are in frost-proof pots).

When shifting plants to a new location, especially going from outdoors to indoors, be aware of dramatic changes in light and temperature. Too abrupt a change will frequently cause yellowing or leaf drop, which is seldom fatal but does not make for a happy looking plant. If you have time before the temperature gets too cold, gradually acclimate your plants to lower light levels by putting them in a shady outdoor location for a week or two before bringing them in, then move them to a spot inside with a similar light level.

When bringing any plant indoors, you will need to thoroughly clean the entire plant and its pot to remove any insects, eggs, or other pests. You can dunk the entire plant in a bucket of water if it fits, or simply wipe leaves down with a damp cloth. If there are insects like aphids, mites or scale, these can be removed with a cotton swab dipped in alcohol, or you can use a commercial insecticidal soap on the entire plant. Flushing the soil thoroughly with water will help settle any pockets that might be harboring pests. Don't forget to look for slug eggs around the edges of the pot and in the drain hole. Nobody wants slugs in the house. After cleaning, consider quarantining the new arrivals away from other indoor plants until you're sure you got everything.

Every plant has its own preferences for light and water. (Fertilizing is usually not necessary in the winter, as most plants grow slowly if at all during this time.) Many houseplants are chosen specifically for indoor culture and do very well in indirect light, but sun loving plants like citrus trees, bananas, and geraniums all want as much light as you can get for them. Watering needs also vary depending on the plant and how much light and warmth it's receiving. Overly damp soil can quickly kill a plant, so it's important to water only when the plant requires it, not necessarily on a regular schedule.



Coleus cuttings in a north facing window in winter. Photo by. Jessamyn Tuttle / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.

Humidity is also a concern for indoor plants, as heated buildings tend to be dry. If you have plants that need high humidity like ferns or orchids, you can cluster them together on a shelf, use a humidity tray, or put smaller plants inside a terrarium. Another option is to keep those plants somewhere that you can regularly mist them with water, like a bathroom.

If you don't have room indoors for everything, another option for overwintering tender perennials like *Pelargonium* (*Geranium*) and fuchsias is to let them settle into winter dormancy. For geraniums, this involves cutting them back hard and either transplanting them into a small container with fast-draining mix, or pulling them up and storing them bareroot. Fuchsias can be dried out somewhat and allowed to lose their leaves, then stored in a cool, not-too-bright area like an unheated garage or basement. In the spring, move plants back out into bright light and start watering again.

There are also some tender plants like cannas and tuberous begonias that, rather than bringing the entire plant inside, you can simply let the foliage die down, then dig up and store the tubers for replanting in early spring.

A final option is, rather than bringing in entire plants, simply taking cuttings and growing those in a sunny window indoors. This has the benefit of taking up much less space, but it doesn't work for everything. It is, however, a great way to keep special varieties of *Geranium*, *Coleus*, passionflower, or *Fuchsia*.

Getting plants ready for winter can be time consuming but having a house full of greenery is a wonderful way to spend the season while you plan ahead for next year's garden.



Special varieties of geranium are worth overwintering or taking cuttings. *Photo by Jessamyn Tuttle / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

RESOURCES:

- BRINGING HOUSEPLANTS INDOORS
Dr. Leonard Perry, Extension Professor,
University of Vermont
<https://pss.uvm.edu/ppp/articles/bringin.html#:~:text=You%20will%20need%20to%20bring,before%20bringing%20plants%20back%20inside.>
- Moving Plants Indoors, October 13, 2020 [Marlene Geiger](https://blogs.extension.iastate.edu/answerline/2020/10/13/moving-plants-indoors/)
<https://blogs.extension.iastate.edu/answerline/2020/10/13/moving-plants-indoors/>
- Bring plants indoors now, but leave the pests behind Gretchen Voyle, [Michigan State University Extension](https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/bring_plants_indoors_now_but_leave_the_pests_behind) - September 17, 2015
https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/bring_plants_indoors_now_but_leave_the_pests_behind
- Acclimating outdoor plants to the indoors for winter Thursday, September 24, 2020
https://news.okstate.edu/articles/agriculture/2020/gedon_moving_plants_inside.html
- Moving Houseplants Indoors — Written By Peg Godwin and last updated by Jennifer Stroud,
<https://lenoir.ces.ncsu.edu/2016/10/moving-houseplants-indoors/>
- <https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2073/2014/03/Winter-Plant-Care-Inside-Your-Home.pdf>
- Overwintering Geraniums, Chicago Botanic Garden
https://www.chicagobotanic.org/plantinfo/faq/overwintering_geraniums
- Overwintering potted fuchsias made simple, The Fuchsietum
<https://fuchsietum.com/blog/files/overwintering-potted-fuchsias-made-simple.php>