Winter Container Care

The key to all-season container planting is making sure that both pots and plants can withstand the most inclement weather they are likely to endure. Many plants that are perfectly hardy in the ground will perish if left outdoors in a pot. Even plants that are quite hardy will not tolerate frozen roots. Therefore, they must be protected from freezes, heavy winds, and other wintry hazards. This involves selecting the right plants and containers, paying careful attention to where they are placed, and providing timely maintenance.
Plants in containers on rooftops and balconies will experience lower temperatures and strong winds. Similarly, decks are more hostile to container plants than terraces because the air circulating under, as well as above, the plants will quickly freeze-burn the roots.

Choosing Pots

Large pots that are at least 18 to 24 inches insulate plant roots better than smaller pots because they hold more soil.

Pots with tapering sides are less likely to crack than waisted containers or those that are narrow at the top. When soil freezes in a tapered pot, the whole bulk tends to slip upwards (called heaving), easing the pressure on the sides of the container. However, this exposes the plant roots to freezing temperatures. To prevent heaving, bury a piece of old garden hose or flexible drainage pipe (which is plugged at each end to prevent soil from getting inside) in the pot. If the pot freezes, the expanding soil will press against the flexible hose or pipe, compressing the air inside the hose. This will relieve the pressure on the outside of the pot.

Terra cotta, concrete, and ceramic containers generally do not tolerate winter ravages well. Terra cotta and concrete pots must be at least 1-1/2 to 2 inches thick to prevent them from cracking when subjected to freezing. Terra cotta pots can be wrapped with wire under the rim for extra support.

In northern gardens where winter temperatures drop below freezing but stay above 20°F, plant hardy plants in unbreakable containers. Freeze-resistant pots made from fiberglass, polyethylene, or structural foam are available. These pots insulate the soil, which helps to regulate the temperature and retain moisture better than traditional pots. They are also easy to move because they are light-weight.

Bringing Containers Indoors

The best solution for cold areas is to bring containers indoors for the winter. Bring tender perennials indoors in late summer or early fall to enjoy before temperatures drop lower than 50°F and before you use your winter heating for the home. Plants need time to adjust to the indoor environment since dry, hot air from heating systems makes the acclimation more difficult. Be sure to rid plants of aphids and other pests by spraying them with a strong jet of water and letting them dry before bringing indoors. Continue to monitor for pests throughout the winter.

Tender perennials can also be preserved during the winter as cuttings. Take cuttings and root them in late summer and overwinter these indoors as small house plants, setting them outside again the following year as soon as the risk of frost has passed.

Protecting Containers Under Shelter

If you cannot bring your container plants indoors, then the best places for overwintering plants in containers are in a heated greenhouse, a garage, or a covered patio. This protects containers from most winter weather and damage, but you will still have to care for the plants through the winter to some extent.

Container plantings need to be protected from prevailing winter winds. A building, dense evergreen hedge, or solid fence can serve as a good wind screen. In choosing a location, keep in mind that sheltered, north-facing areas are actually less punishing than southern or eastern exposures, which warm by day and drop quickly to freezing temperatures by night. The freeze-and-thaw cycle can severely damage plants.

Protecting Exposed Containers

If you have no shelter available for your container plants, various coverings and wraps will provide some protection. Wrap plants with evergreen tree boughs or straw, secured with twine to hold them close to the container. For protection from strong winds, barricades of burlap can be placed around the plants. Enclose containers with a cylinder of chicken wire filled with dried leaves or straw and keep it dry with a waterproof cover. Set pots in large boxes packed with styrene packing pieces. You can also try removing the plant from the container in the fall, planting it in the ground in the warmest part of your yard, and re-potting it in the spring (or the entire container can be buried).

Straw or evergreen branches can be laid on top of the soil and around the plants to keep the soil from heaving out of the pot. This will protect against prolonged freezing, which can burn the roots. Or mulch the top of the pot with 2 inches of shredded hardwood to hold moisture and insulate the soil.

In climates where long-term freezing is inevitable, equip yourself with plenty of old bedsheets or lightweight blankets to cover plants at night and protect them through cold spells until freezing weather sets in. In milder climates (Zone 7 and warmer) these covers prove useful from time to time to get your plants through a cold snap. Heavy plastic or layers of newspaper can be placed over the plants when frost is expected and removed after the danger is past.

To protect plants from snow, place wide, spreading plants under a tunnel structure made from wood or wire hoops, supporting strong but fine mesh netting. Tie netting around narrow, columnar plants.

Protecting Empty Containers

Empty pots should be protected from snow and freezing rain. Repetitive freezing and thawing can damage clay, porcelain, and plastic pots. This damage includes fading, chipping, and flaking edges and bottoms. Move empty containers to a shed, garage, covered patio, or up against the house or fence and cover them with a tarp to prolong their life.

Winter is a great time to clean pots before the busier spring season begins. Use steel wool and vinegar to wash off fertilizer salts on terra cotta pots. It is also a good idea to sanitize your pots with a 10% bleach and water solution to prevent spreading overwintering diseases.

Winter Watering and Fertilizing

Because containers outdoors are exposed to the elements at the sides as well as the top, they dry out faster and need frequent watering, even in the winter. Make sure that you keep the soil mix at least slightly moist—plants don't need much water during cold weather, but their roots must never dry out entirely. As feeder roots freeze, they stop absorbing water, so keep plants well watered before the first hard freeze. Whenever the temperature rises above 40°F from November through March, check the soil in your containers for moisture.

Also check to make sure the pots drain well. Dormant perennials can be easily killed if water accumulates in the pot and freezes.

You need not fertilize during the winter months when overwintering container plants outdoors. Most plants are dormant during the winter and use their own store of nutrients to survive. For plants brought indoors, fertilize lightly, since they have not gone completely dormant.

Don't Let Mother Nature Fool You!

In all areas, have patience in the spring. Re-acquaint house-bound plants to the outdoors gradually. Wait until the nighttime air temperatures stay consistently above 50°F before removing winter wraps. Night frost can be damaging to young shoots and, where early growth has been rapid (for example, in a greenhouse), plant tissue will be soft and easily bruised by wind.

Do not remove coverings too soon in the spring – frost damage can occur when balmy days are followed by cold windy nights. Also, just because a plant can survive the winter in the ground doesn't mean that it can manage cold weather in a container, so you may have to hold off replanting into a container.

Even though your container plants may live most of their lives outdoors, introduce them slowly from shelter or indoors in the spring to get them acclimated to the temperature and the sun. It is important to watch for late frosts after placing containers outside. Even sun-lovers must be exposed only to early-morning sun at first. The north side of the house is a perfect spot because they get the morning sun in increasing doses as the season progresses. Once outside, well-acclimated plants are much less susceptible to pests and diseases.

Another year of beautiful container gardening begins again!

References

Gardening in Containers. California: Ortho Books, 1996.

Lewis, Eleanore. *Container Gardens*. Better Homes and Gardens, Little Brown and Company, 2001.

Colborn, Nigel. *The Container Garden*. Little Brown and Company, 1990.