

Winterizing Your Planted Containers

Without the insulating thermal mass of in-ground planting, the soil in containers may dip as low as the air temperature. When coupled with the stress of freeze-thaw cycles on warm days, winter cold can kill plant roots and crack clay pots.

Remember, protecting the root system is the most important factor in ensuring your plant's survival over winter. The goal is to prevent heat loss, not warm up the plants.

Here are some tips for protecting container plants:

- The larger the 'container', the greater insulation of the soil around the plants' roots. Bury pots in the ground or set into a larger container with thick walls to further insulate pots.
- Water plants well before the first freeze. Keeping containers under eaves will allow you to control the water.
- Group planters together close to buildings/under eaves for added protection, ideally against a south-facing wall.
- Place containers in/on soil or sand. Excess water will drain freely from the planter into this medium.
- Wrap pots with some kind of insulation—blankets, bubble wrap, foam or burlap. This will help further protect the root ball.
- To protect the top part of the plant from frost, place several tall stakes around the rim of the pot and wrap with frost cloth or burlap.
- Mulch around the plant with straw, dried leaves, or some other organic mulch. (See below: A WORD ABOUT MULCH.)
- If you bring containers inside, place them in an unheated basement or garage. Check every few weeks for water.

A WORD ABOUT MULCH: Plants appreciate a layer of mulch, however do not apply too thickly before the weather turns frosty. The plant's roots need some exposure to colder temperatures to trigger their natural physiological 'hardening off' process. Thick insulating mulch applied too early prevents the plant from receiving that important cue. Do not apply mulches directly to the base of plants. It's best to place the mulch at least 6" or more from the base of the trees and shrubs to prevent collar rot. Also, avoid the use of mulches, such as large tree leaves, that will compact when wet and exclude air from the roots. Gradually remove the mulch in spring as the temperature rises.