



# Wrapping up for winter

Protecting cold-sensitive plants needs advance planning. But, if spells of freezing weather are forecast, it may not be too late to save tender plants. Phil Clayton explains. Photography by Tim Sandall



**WINTER CAN BE** a nervous time for gardeners with cold-sensitive plants; will those outdoors in their first winter stand the frost? Usually, damaging cold where ground freezes for days is limited to the first months of the year; autumn is increasingly frost-free in many areas.

Apart from the really tropical – say, a *Begonia rex* or *Cymbidium* on summer holiday from the house – most plants tolerate the gradual fall in temperatures from mid-September. Indeed many tender plants come into their own in autumn: dahlias, cannas and ginger look wonderful late in the season. As leaves fall and days shorten, however, the inevitable is just around the corner.

### Prioritisation is key

Little is worse than finding (at the last minute) a frost is forecast and knowing you have many plants to be protected, moved or lifted and put under cover. Equally, dismantling displays early is a shame – while the first frost (for me, in Peterborough) may be in September, often it is up to two months later.

As a result, I now protect my plants in a staggered, less-stressful way.

- The first ones I tackle, in September, are definitely-tender plants in pots – for example, leafy *Colocasia* or choice *Pelargonium* such as *P. 'Splendide'* – also things I do not want damaged, such as a standard fuchsia or *Brugmansia*. All go in my glasshouse; otherwise use a conservatory or a cool spare room.
- At the same time I consider plants that need to be on the dry side in winter – pots of succulent *Echeveria* or

bulbous plants such as *Freesia*; these come inside or go in a cold frame.

- I also move potted plants that are a bit tougher but growing well – cannas, dahlias and long-term plants such as *Washingtonia* palm – close to the house.
- Next I deal with tenderish plants in the ground. Some are long term, others bedded out. I seldom plant out things that will be killed outright or severely damaged by the first frost, unless grown as annuals – I don't want to be scrabbling outdoors in my nightclothes by torchlight after catching the late-night weather forecast. Plants such silver-leaved *Plectranthus argentatus* or superb *Salvia confertiflora* I do bed out, but take late cuttings – even in October they root easily in pots of multipurpose compost under glass or on a windowsill. The following year I ensure one of each is pot grown: these are my insurance should I forget to get stock rooted next time.
- Some plants are becoming dormant at this time and must not be allowed to get too wet. Pans of *Rhodohypoxis*, for example, I cover with a slate or old roof tile and put in a sheltered spot.

### After the frost

By the middle of October (or sooner) I have dealt with all that will not tolerate frost or is too precious to lose.

- After the first frost I look again at my pots. Dahlias and other plants will be blackened and can be cut to 12cm (5in), brought in and kept dry for winter under the benches. Unless you are in a cold snap, there is no great urgency.
- Borderline-hardy plants can stay out

### TIME TO COME IN

Frost-sensitive palms such as *Washingtonia* grow well in containers (right), but need indoor protection in the coldest periods



longer but if repeated frosts threaten, plants such as *Washingtonia* come in.

- Before Christmas I ensure anything in the ground is protected – herbaceous plants such as *Hedychium* or *Impatiens tinctoria* – under a thick mulch of garden compost. Dahlias and gladioli need lifting and storing. Others such as bananas (see box, below left) I wrap; damage-prone crowns of tree ferns and palms I protect with straw.
- In freezing weather even hardy potted plants need protection to prevent roots freezing solid – move to shelter and wrap in bubble plastic and fleece. Raise on 'pot feet' to ensure good drainage.
- Be prepared to dash out with fleece on bitter nights; damage to plants such as camellias, echiums and cordylines may be avoided. Remove protection in warmer spells for air circulation.

If you grow tender plants, invariably in a cold winter you may lose some, yet I find it is surprising how much cold many take – giving a little protection increases their chances further still. ■

Phil Clayton is Features Editor for *The Garden*

**i** For more information on this topic, visit [www.rhs.org.uk/advicesearch/Profile.aspx?pid=337](http://www.rhs.org.uk/advicesearch/Profile.aspx?pid=337)

## PLANT PROTECTION TACTICS



### Shelter in a cold frame

Smaller potted plants of borderline hardiness such as *Agave americana*, evergreen *Agapanthus* (above) or *Salvia* are best moved into a cold frame before severe weather or snowfall arrives. This will keep plants dry and provide some protection from the lowest temperatures.



### Keep dormant plants dry

Potted plants that become dormant over winter, but need to be kept dry at the root – such as *Rhodohypoxis*, *Eucomis* and, in mild areas, *Dahlia* and *Canna* – can simply be moved to the shelter of a house wall and pots covered over with a slate or polythene sheeting until spring.



### Mulch alpines with grit

Pot-grown alpines such as *Lewisia* or *Haberlea* (above) and other small plants, while hardy, suffer in winter if too wet. Grow in shallow pans of well-drained compost and provide a topdressing of grit to help drain excess moisture away from the crowns of these plants to prevent rots.



### Cover tender roots

Perennials and bulbs grown in the ground but of dubious hardiness such as *Canna*, *Hedychium* or *Impatiens tinctoria* can be covered with a thick mulch of coarse garden compost, held in place with chicken wire. This will provide an additional layer of protection over roots and crowns.



### Protect tree fern crowns

Tree ferns, palms and cordylines grow from a single growing tip which may need protection in winter. It is important to allow good air circulation to prevent the tip rotting, killing the plant. The simplest measure is to stuff the crown with straw in the coldest periods (above).



### Lift and pot

Many tender plants are best brought under glass, away from all risk of frost. Bulbs such as *Nerine sarniensis* (above), perennials such as *Colocasia* or shrubby plants including tender fuchsias can be potted into small containers in well-drained compost and kept cool and dry. It often helps to trim plants back.



## HELP YOUR BANANAS

Bananas such as *Musa basjoo*, *M. sikkimensis* and *M. lasiocarpa* have relatively hardy roots and survive outdoors in many areas. However, to grow a large specimen you must protect the more tender, trunk-like stems. Leaves can be cut off once frosted.

In a mild winter, sheltered area or favoured part of the UK, stems can be wrapped in fleece or (if removed in mild spells) bubble wrap. In colder conditions use wire netting and stakes to make an enclosure around the plant and fill with straw, covering with polythene if required (left). This may also allow tender bananas such as *Ensete* to overwinter in mild districts.