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## Over Wintering Tropical Plants

Tropical plants are plants that will not tolerate freezing temperatures. Special care is required in order to keep these plants alive from one year to the next. They will reward you by making an immediate impact in your garden the following spring, since they will have achieved larger sizes and greater character!

The type of plants you grow will dictate the measures that you need to take in order to carry these tropicals over the cold winter months. In the warm regions of the world, dry periods usually induce dormancy in plants, not cold spells or day length. You need to mimic the plant's natural dormancy period if it has one. The following are four basic over wintering choices and examples of plants that best respond to each method.

### Over wintering as a growing houseplant

Many tropicals will adapt and grow inside your house over the winter months if the conditions are right. High, indirect light and cool temperatures around 60F are best. Increasing the humidity in the room with the use of a humidifier or water-filled pebble trays is beneficial.

*Variegated Shell Ginger (Alpinea), Bananas (Musa and Ensete), Bottlebrush (Callistemon), Citrus, Gardenia, Lily of the Nile (Agapanthus), Mandevilla, New Zealand Flax (Phormium), Palms, Night Shade (Solanum), Hibiscus, Lavender, Bougainvillea, Star Jasmine (Trachelospermum), Century Plant (Agave), Dracena (Cordyline) do well with this method.*

### Storing it as a dormant plant, bulb, corm or tuber

**Bulbs, tubers and corms** are underground storage structures with nutrients and growing points from which new stems and leaves emerge. Plants that have these types of structures usually die down in cool or dry spells and rain or warm weather will induce new growth. In order to save these plants, allow the first frost to turn the tops black or brown. Then dig with a fork or spade, cut back and remove the dying tops and any diseased areas. Allow to dry and remove as much of the soil as possible. These structures can then be stored in peat moss kept just barely moist. It is important to keep them in a dark place and at a moderate temperature of 40F to 45F to prevent them from growing. An unheated basement, garage, root cellar or winterized porch will do if these conditions are met. Examine them every month for signs of rot or decay. Discard diseased parts and spray with a bit of water to keep them from drying out too much. In early spring, pot, water and bring to a sunny, warm location to induce growth.

*Canna lily, Elephant ears (Colocasia) and Society Garlic (Tulbaghia) do well with this method.*

**For herbaceous plants**, bring in before first frost, cut back tops, dig root ball and plant in appropriate size pot in soil-less potting medium.

*Purple Fountain Grass (Pennisetum), Peruvian Lily (Alstroemeria), Lithodora, Euryops, Fern, Fuchsia, Bush Mallow (Lavatera), Lavender, Mandevilla and Mexican Heather (Cuphea) do well with this method.*

**For woody shrubs**, cut back only if size is unmanageable, plant in container with soil-less potting medium, withhold water, and keep in a cool, dark place above 35F. Leaves will turn yellow and fall. Keep these herbaceous and woody plants dry, but not parched over the winter. Check for moisture every two to four weeks and add a little as needed. Before planting them in their summer spot, prune and shape, fertilize, water, place them in a warm spot and gradually reintroduce them to stronger light.

*Bottlebrush (Callistemon), Citrus, Crepe Myrtle (Lagerstroemia), Lantana, Hibiscus, Bougainvillea, Passion Vine (Passiflora), Pomegranate (Punica), Shrimp Plant (Justicia), Night Shade (Solanum), Star Jasmine (Trachelospermum), Sweet Pea Shrub (Polygala) and Plumbago do well with this method.*

## **Collect seed or take cuttings**

This method is preferred if storage space is a problem. Size will be sacrificed, but many tropicals grow quickly from cuttings taken in late summer before plants go dormant. Take four to six inch cuttings from the growing tips, remove bottom leaves, and cut to right below the node, dip in rooting compound and place into a container with very moist sand. Covering with a plastic dome or bag that allows light to penetrate and moisture to stay inside the chamber will hasten rooting. Once a good mass of roots has formed, plant into a small container of soil-less potting medium. Water and grow on as a small houseplant until it is time to plant them outdoors.

*Fuchsia, Sweet potato vine (Ipomoea) and Hibiscus do well with this method.*

For plants that are best propagated by seed, collect the seeds throughout the growing season as they mature, dry and store in airtight containers until it is time to sow.

*Morning Glory (Ipomoea), Clockvine (Thunbergia) do well with this method.*

## **Leave outside, but protected**

For marginally hardy plants allow hard frost to kill back the top, remove all damaged parts and cover heavily with dry mulch such as straw. In the spring, as new growth emerges, remove extra protective material, fertilize and watch them grow!

*Hardy Banana (Musa basjoo) and other marginally hardy shrubs do well with this method*

Sources:

[Over-wintering Tropical and Subtropical Plants](#) by Doris Rodriguez, Chief Horticulturist  
[Container Plants](#) by Halina Heitz