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Winterizing and Protecting Your Garden From Cold©

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With the onset of cooler weather, we can finally start thinking about how to winterize and protect our investment in the yard and garden. Some plants and trees don't need any extra help from us to make it through the winter. Others require that we be diligent in wrapping them up with frost blanket or bringing container plants inside when temperatures dip below a certain level. Water requirements change with the season and with regard to yard clean-up, an ounce of prevention can save you a big headache in the Spring. Now that everyone has their Winter garden planted, we want to address these concerns.

Pruning: At this time, you really want to avoid pruning. If you need to remove spent flower heads, you may do so carefully to avoid leaving your plants or shrubs vulnerable to freezing conditions. After a hard freeze, leave any damaged branches on the plants to act as an insulator for the undamaged portion of the plant.

Fertilizing: Do not fertilize any of your plants, trees or shrubs this month. Many plants have gone dormant and if they have not, active growth has slowed down considerably. New growth is frost tender.

Planting: You can still successfully plant cold-hardy trees and shrubs at this time of year. It is okay to plant roses this month as well. Stone fruit trees (peaches, apricots, nectarines, etc. are okay to plant, but DO NOT plant citrus or other fruit trees which need warmer temperatures to get established and are frost sensitive. Avoid planting cacti and succulents. Be prepared to cover any newly planted tree or shrubs on nights when temperatures are expected to drop down below freezing.

For color, it is fine to plant cold hardy annuals such as pansies, violas, snapdragons, Iceland poppy, petunias, dianthus, alyssum, primrose, etc. Also, many herbs do fine with the cold temperatures. Mint, sorrel, thyme, sage, rosemary, tarragon, chives, marjoram,

oregano, etc. will do fine, especially if they have been hardened off by your favorite nursery. Basil will freeze, so you might want to grow this indoors in a sunny window. You can still start root vegetables, spinach and lettuce from seed, and transplants of cole crops such as broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, kale, etc. Again, you may need to protect these plants if temperatures dip, especially if you are in the high country where temperatures frequently drop to 20 degrees or below.

Protecting Plants from Frost: When the weather forecast calls for a hard freeze, there are several steps you can take to protect your plants from damage. Frost blankets are a must-have. While you can certainly cover your plants with sheets, burlap or blankets, these must be removed daily to allow sunlight for continued growth. The advantage to using frost blanket is that it is permeable, allowing for sunlight to pass through, and can remain over the plants for 2-3 weeks at a time for extended cold periods. You can even leave it on through rain and snow. You should never use plastic of any kind to cover plants. Plastic is not an insulator and can trap moisture underneath causing ice to form and doing more harm to the plant.

Another thing you can do is water your cold-sensitive trees, shrubs and plants thoroughly when a freeze is expected. This will help them stand up to a freeze. They do this through latent heat released when the water physically changes from water to ice.

Cacti and succulents can be protected by covering them with a cardboard box, or if they are a large specimen, styrofoam cups placed on the tips can prevent damage.

Remember, a cold wind can be more damaging than a freeze. Extra water and frost blanket coverage can also help protect your plants from desiccation (drying up) caused by cold, dry air and windy conditions.

Hardening Off: Hardening off is the process of slowing down the plant's rate of growth so that the foliage is no longer soft and succulent. Usually plants will harden themselves off with the onset of cooler nighttime temperatures. However, this year the weather has been unseasonably warm and the cold temperatures came on suddenly. This sudden drop has caught many plants (such as Bougainvillea and Citrus) still in an active growth stage and as such, vulnerable to even mild temperatures in the low 30's. You can help your plants to harden off by not fertilizing, cutting back gradually on the frequency of your watering schedule, and not pruning.

We hope this covers the basics, and helps you to protect your investment. Happy gardening!