

Put Your Border to Bed for the Winter

Although putting your plants 'to bed' for the winter can be a sad event, think about how you'll feel if the plants fail to come back up in spring! Preparing beds for winter is very important. If you wait until too late, or don't do it at all, you may pay the price.

Winter is tough on plants in several ways. First, it's just plain cold! For some plants, the tops freeze back and the roots and



Straw is perfect for winter protection

buds go dormant. Although dormant, they are still alive and need some insulation from the cold.

Other plants simply tolerate cold temperatures to a certain point, and once the temperatures fall below that point, they freeze and fail to grow the next spring.

Another major problem we face in winter in the alternating freeze-thaw cycle. This damages plants in the following way. When ground temperatures warm up above freezing (like bare soil does on a sunny clear day) any near-by ice or snow will thaw and filter into the soil.

When night comes,

temperatures drop and the water in the soil freezes. Water expands as it freezes, and will push on anything around it, like the crowns of your favorite plants.

With each freeze/thaw cycle, these plants are pushed up out of the soil even more, exposing the roots and crowns to the cold weather, which kills or severely damages them. This is called heaving. Plants like coral bells are quite susceptible to this.

To prevent any of these problems from occurring, you need to cover your beds with a winter mulch. Unlike the mulches used to prevent weeds, these are placed on the beds in late fall and removed in early spring.

They act to keep the ground frozen (to prevent the freeze/thaw heaving cycle) and to keep the soil temperatures from getting excessively cold, to prevent winter kill.

Good choices for winter mulches are straw (hay can contain excessive weed seeds) and pine boughs. These materials don't pack down, an important key for good insulation.

Timing is also important, wait until after a couple hard frosts, to ensure the ground temperature has cooled. Waiting to mulch later may also keep over-wintering mice away, since they will have located other hibernating spots by then.

Your Questions...

Question: What's the best way to store my tuberous begonias and caladium bulbs over the winter?

Answer: These are two of the best bulbs for shaded gardens and patios. They can also be expensive. Fortunately, it's easy to store them over the winter.

Before top growth is injured by the first frost, dig up the bulbs carefully, avoiding any physical damage to them.

If it's important for you to keep the different varieties separate, make sure to label the bags or boxes they're being stored in immediately. Once leaves and flowers are cut off, it can be impossible to tell which is which.

Cut all foliage and stems back to where the soil line was, leaving the soil and roots around the bulb intact.

Place the bulbs (soil, roots and all) in a cool (above freezing),

dry area to cure for 2-3 weeks. Then, remove the soil and the remaining stalks and roots, which should be shriveled and dry.

Toss out any rotted bulbs and dust the rest with captan. Pack the tubers in dry peat moss, sand, sawdust or vermiculite. This prevents excessive moisture loss.

The key to successful winter storage is to keep the bulbs from freezing temperatures. A cool 50-55 degrees is fine.

Do not store these tender bulbs in the garage or shed where they can freeze. Once these bulbs freeze, they will fail to grow the following spring. Good luck!



Save your tuberous begonias this fall