The Green Thumb

Lawn and Garden News You Can Use

October 2008

Time to Bring Plants Indoors

Martha Smith, horticulture educator

If you took your indoor houseplants outdoors for the summer, now is the time to start the process of bringing them back inside for the winter. Most of our indoor plants are tropical and grow where temperatures rarely drop below 40 degrees. You will need to bring your plants in before nighttime temperatures dip below 45 degrees.

Houseplants moved indoors face two challenges. They must adapt to a different growing environment, and they may harbor unwanted pests both in the soil and on the plant. The answer to both challenges is to isolate the plants in a brightly lit location for six weeks. Bringing them in without isolating or checking and treating for pests can result in pest problems spreading to other indoor plants.

Because conditions greatly differ between the inside and outside of your home, a gradual re-entry is recommended. Sudden changes in temperature, light, watering, and humidity can be traumatic to plants, often resulting in leaf drop, foliage discoloration, wilting, die-back, and even death. If daytime temps are still warm, you could bring the plants indoors overnight and set them back out during the day.

Indoor lighting is often the limiting factor for tropical plants. Tolerance of low light varies with each type of plant. Place plants in a bright area or provide supplemental lighting with gro-lights. Put the lights on timers set for 16 hours a day. Clean windows, both inside and out, to insure plants receive the maximum amount of possible light. Group together plants with similar light requirements. Regularly rotate plants so they don't lean in one direction towards the light and become lopsided.

Water less frequently. While outdoors, plants were exposed to drying conditions of wind and high temperatures. Indoors, they won't require as much water. Let the soil surface feel dry to the touch before watering again. If the weather is cloudy, plants won't be drying out as quickly, so monitor carefully.

Check for pests using an integrated pest management approach. Don't immediately reach for the spray bottle. Closely inspect plants for pests. Look on top and underneath foliage. Inspect stems and leaf axils where insects burrow. Hand remove pests, if possible, or brush pests with an alcohol-soaked swab to kill them. Wrap the container in a plastic bag, securing with a twist tie at the base of the plant and gently hose off the plant, making sure to reach the underside of the foliage. Inspect the roots for hidden trespassers such as slugs or snails. Unwanted critters enter through the soil surface and the drainage hole. Keeping plants separated for six weeks will isolate any problems and give you a chance to manage pests with the least amount of chemical.

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Protecting Trees Against Deer Damage

Tony Bratsch, horticulture educator

During the winter months, deer can wreak havoc on a landscape. A hungry deer will eat about any vegetation and can put away more than 4 pounds of twiggy branches a day. Damage to trees and shrubs can be extensive, affecting plant shape and exposing bare wood to disease and insects.

The fall months bring another type of deer damage associated with the mating "rut." From early September through November, male deer are looking to clean their antlers of summer velvet, while at the same time marking territory during the breeding season. In addition to rubbing antlers against trees to remove velvet, buck deer assert themselves by thrashing and battering the tree for noise effect, and coating the twigs and bark with scent from glands in their face and underbody to mark territory.

Young trees, especially those 1 to 4 inches in diameter with smooth bark, are at risk—including maple, magnolias, and birch. Young, soft-wooded, pliable saplings, especially pine and bald cypress, are also targets and can quickly be reduced to stubs. Deer will continue rubbing even after the velvet is removed.

Tree damage involves shredding of bark from 1 to 4 feet up, exposing underlying wood. If rubbed all the way around, the trunk can be girdled. If small trees are bent over, main leaders and smaller limbs can be broken off. Usually the damage is done in a 24-hour period. Because this is also a territorial action, bucks may revisit trees they like in subsequent years. Keep in mind that a buck in rut is an unpredictable animal. With its sharp antlers, it is a clear danger; challenging the buck or attempting to scare it away may result in an attack.

So what can be done? Trim loose, shredded bark where it's not tightly connected to the trunk. Where the bark isn't loosened around the circumference, the tree might heal and continue to develop. Fully girdled trees will die. If limbs have been broken, the tree's structure may be altered. Prune broken branches to a strong side shoot or main branch or trunk. If the tip has been broken off, look for an un-damaged shoot close to the top of the tree that might be trained as a new leader. If nothing is done, the tree will re-sprout in the spring below the damaged area and become shrubby in growth and appearance. Over the course of the growing season, new bark will develop to cover exposed wood.

If the tree recovers, protect it next fall by wrapping the trunk with plastic trunk wraps, strips of rubber tubing, or hardware mesh. One or two steel posts set next to the tree will help deter rubbing action. Flared bases on posts should be set in-line with the trunk to reduce root damage when the post is driven in. Light gauge steel-type posts, 4 to 6 feet long, can be used to protect smaller trees. You can also make a temporary fence around large trees from September through November, using woven fencing or chicken wire.

Bars of soap hung in the tree and bags of human and pet hair have varying degrees of effectiveness in repelling deer; they work especially well to prevent browsing on young fruit trees. Pre-formulated and homemade spray-on repellents are one of the most common deer control techniques used for woody plants. The effectiveness of repellents is based on several factors. Rain and moisture dissipate some materials, so reapplication is needed. If food is extremely scarce, deer may simply ignore the repellents, despite the taste or odor. A deer in rut will likely disregard it altogether.

Deer can significantly damage new and young trees. Take steps now to protect them from rutting bucks. Correctively prune trees that do get damaged and pay attention to them next year—they may be revisited and damaged further.

Planting Spring-Flowering Bulbs

David Robson, horticulture educator

Fall is the only time spring-flowering bulbs such as tulips and daffodils can be planted. If you've never planted bulbs before, or if you just need a refresher, here are some basic tips to help insure success.

When—The best time to get bulbs into the ground is when soil temperatures fall below 60 degrees. That generally occurs in October.

Where—Bulbs can be planted in beds, in rock gardens, in ground covers, or under trees and shrubs. Most species prefer partial shade, so avoid planting them in areas that receive direct mid-day sun. Also, keep them away from heated basement walls.

How—For tulips, daffodils, or other large bulbs, the bed must be 8 inches deep and wide enough to accommodate 12 or more bulbs spaced 6 inches apart. Smaller bulbs such as crocuses and muscari require a bed that is 5 inches deep with bulbs spaced 3 inches apart.

Good drainage is essential for all spring-flowering bulbs. If your soil is mostly clay, mix in an organic material such as peat moss or compost in amounts up to 50 percent in volume. If your soil is mostly sand, add peat moss or compost in the same amount to increase water and nutrient-holding capacity.

Fertilization improves bulb performance and encourages bulbs to flower for several years without replacement.

Two fertilizing methods are recommended for spring-flowering bulbs. One method uses a sulfur-coated, slow-release complete fertilizer. It is applied to the rooting area at the rate of 1 rounded tablespoon per square foot at planting time.

The second method is a broadcast application of 8-8-8 (1 level tablespoon) or 10-10-10 (1 rounded teaspoon) fertilizer per square foot in the fall.

Place the bulbs in the bed, tips pointing upward and spaced as suggested above. Cover them with half the conditioned soil and thoroughly water the area. Add the remaining conditioned soil and soak the area again.

Cover the planted area with a 3-inch layer of mulch. Wood chips, peat moss, and bark are good choices because they do not mat. Keep the soil moist, particularly during dry spells.

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If all else fails, use a houseplant pesticide in a safe location according to the label instructions. If the plant is extremely unhealthy, it's probably best to throw it out and replace it next season.

Plants may appear a bit less robust at first so give them time to adjust. Expect some signs of stress as plants acclimate to their new environment. Some plants rebound quicker than others. Be patient, and you will once again be able to enjoy your houseplants year-round.

Question Corner

Answer provided by David Robson, U of I Extension horticulture educator

Q. Is there a best time of year to trim evergreens or shrubs? The evergreens I have are too large. They have to be trimmed back to the point that there are just branches and no green needles. Will they grow back?

A. It depends on what type of evergreen it is. Yews can be trimmed back any time except July through September. Spruces and firs should be pruned in the late spring (probably late May) when the new growth has started hardening off. Pines are often pruned when the new candle length is done shooting out, but before it becomes hard. You can usually cut the new growth back by one-half. This usually is in June. For most junipers, prune in the early spring before growth starts.

Realize that most evergreen trees are best left to their own nature, and pruning should only be done to correct deficiencies in shape or to remove dead limbs. If you are pruning to keep an evergreen tree small, prune at ground level, grind out the trunk, and plant a dwarf form instead.

Send your lawn and garden questions to:

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