

Pensacola News Journal
for: Sunday, Dec.3, 2000
by: Daniel E. Mullins
Extension Horticultural Agent
Santa Rosa County

Helping Patio Plants Through the Winter

The recent freeze resulted in much excitement and a flurry of activity as gardeners carried, dragged and rolled patio and deck plants indoors. Most of the containerized plants currently being used are tropicals or subtropicals and bringing them indoors was certainly necessary.

Plant species such as tropical Hibiscus, Schefflera, citrus, crotons and Datura are very tender and most could have been seriously damaged, if not killed by temperatures in the mid - twenties.

Now that they are indoors, whether it be in a Florida room or anywhere else there is space, there are some other considerations. Tropical and subtropical plants need more than just warmth in order to remain healthy.

Light

The brightest room in your home has about one-tenth as much light as is available outdoors on any given day. Obviously, plants that have become accustomed to plenty of sunlight will suffer to some degree when brought inside.

Place plants within 4 feet of a south, east or west facing window when possible. Artificial lighting is sometimes practical, but only if it is of the right quality and intensity. The distance from the light source to each plant is also an important factor. Consult with your nursery, lighting expert or Extension agent before investing in a plant lighting system.

Temperature

Tropical and subtropical plants can be safely brought through the winter without maintaining extremely high temperatures. A goal would be to maintain temperatures above 50 degrees F. for most species. In our area, an unheated Florida room works quite well.

Humidity

The move from outdoors to indoors results in a drastic change in humidity for plants.

During the growing season they became accustomed to very humid air. Once indoors they will be subjected to extremely dry air, somewhere in the 20% range. This alone, is enough to cause a certain amount of shock and accompanying leaf drop.

Watering and Fertilizing

Once these plants are brought indoors for the winter, they tend to shut down or go into a “survival mode.” Don’t attempt to keep them growing or flowering, but rather just try to keep them alive and looking decently.

The frequency of watering will be greatly reduced, because respiration slows down during the winter. Very little, if any fertilizer is needed either.

Relieving “Cabin Fever”

Consider moving stored plants outdoors during mild periods. This helps to perk them up and better survive the winter. Set the pots on a hard surface, such as a sidewalk or patio but not where full sunlight will strike them. Take this opportunity to rinse the leaves and give them a thorough watering.

Leave them outside until night temperatures are predicted to fall below 50 degrees F. Careful weather watching will allow several opportunities to temporarily move potted plants outside during the winter.

Question of the Week: I would like to treat my St. Augustine lawn with an insecticide in order to prevent insects next spring and summer. What should I use?

Answer: There is no advantage to treating your lawn at this time of year. In fact, you would be wasting money, as well as applying a pesticide when it is not needed. I know of no lawn insects, except grubs, that are active during the winter. Add to this the fact that most insecticidal products currently in use last only a few weeks; there is little reason to treat.

Just to be sure that all the bases are covered, contact your closest Florida Extension office and ask for a publication entitled “White Grubs and Billbugs in Home Lawns.” It is ENY 321, and describes how to check for these insects in the soil and includes recommended control measures, if needed.