

Extension Tip of the Week

Container gardens offer the advantage of changing your garden with every season. But many gardeners often include hardy perennials and tropical plants along with annuals in their container gardens. Perennial plants like spotted dead nettle, golden moneywort, hostas, and ornamental grasses all have attractive leaves that work well in containers. Begonia, lantana, asparagus fern, and geraniums are a few of the tender perennial that look good in mixed container plantings. Some people even include miniature shrubs, evergreens, herbs, and vegetables in their combinations. The question is, will all or any of these plants survive the winter in the container? That depends.

First, if it's a clay pot or a ceramic pot, the plants may survive, but the pot may not. Clay and ceramic pots should be emptied and stored indoors during the winter. The perennial plants can be planted in a nursery bed and reused again next year. The tropical plants can be repotted and enjoyed as house plants during the winter.

If the container is one that won't be harmed by freezing temperatures, then you may be able to over winter the hardy perennial plants by putting the pot in a sheltered location and mulching it. The north side of a building would be ideal; the south side would be the worst. Sunny days in November and December would prevent plants from gradually acclimating to the cold.

Roots are more sensitive to cold injury than the crown or the woody top. How much cold they can tolerate is genetically determined. PJM rhododendrons are "root hardy" to minus 9 degrees Fahrenheit while Exbury Hybrid rhododendrons are only hardy to plus 17 degrees Fahrenheit. Roots of most plants are killed at about minus 10 degrees Fahrenheit. Soil temperatures seldom get that low, especially with a good snow cover, but soil temperatures in a pot above ground can get much colder. Nurseries that grow container plants usually put pots as close together as possible in late fall and cover everything with "sandwich" of fabric, covered with mulch, then covered again with fabric. Over wintering perennials in pots is risky, but it may be worth your while and doesn't cost a lot. *By Dr. Eldon Everhart, Horticulture Specialist, Iowa State University Extension*

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