Overwintering Tropical Plants

When it's time to clear off your porch and patio, here are a few tips for an easier transition for both you and your plants.

keep or throw away?

This is not a decision to be taken lightly. Most tropicals and houseplants only barely tolerate being indoors – they are much happier outside! If you have too many plants crowded together, competing for light and space, they will be more prone to pests and diseases. Even the best efforts may end in failure. Evaluate your available space and select the plants you really love and give them prime treatment. Some plants are difficult to overwinter and it may be best just to buy new plants in the spring. On the other hand, you may have put time and money into plants that have flourished through the summer. If you invest a little bit more time with the plants that are amenable to overwintering, you will have bigger plants to decorate your patio next spring!

option 1: bring them in as a houseplant

good for: alocasia, begonia, citrus, cordyline, croton, dracaena, gardenia, hibiscus, jasmine, musa, palms

This group of plants will be happy moving inside to a warm, bright place. A sunny window is ideal and smaller plants may be placed under a grow-light with a timer set for about 12 hours of light. The intensity of winter light is much lower and plant growth will slow down, so water only as needed, keeping on the dry side. The ideal air temperature is 65° during the day and 50° at night (plus or minus about 5°). Temperatures should never dip below 40° but on the other hand, warmer temperatures may lead to leggy growth and bug problems. Check weekly for whiteflies, spider mites and scale and treat with insecticidal soap at the first sighting. Humidity is often a problem indoors during the winter. Try to keep the levels between 30-45% using humidity trays and/or a humidifier. Avoid crowding and maintain good air circulation, using a fan if necessary. Larger plants may need to be pruned to become more manageable before bringing inside. If they have been freshly dug up from the garden their root-pruning will need to be balanced by top pruning. Refrain from fertilizing until they have returned outdoors in May.

option 2: provide winter rest for dormant plants

abutilon, banana, bougainvillea, brugmansia, duranta, fig, hibiscus, jasmine, justicia, mandevilla, oleander, tibouchina

Similar to the above category, these plants will do fine with some winter "down" time. Although you prepare them for coming inside in the same way as the houseplants (see below), they should be coaxed into dormancy by moving them to a cool place (40° – 50°) with little to no light and withholding water. Their leaves will yellow and drop and they can spend the winter in an unheated basement, root cellar, unheated garage or even a cool closet. The resting place should be relatively dark (or cover loosely with cloth) and air temperatures should stay above freezing. Water sparingly throughout the winter, checking monthly to make sure the soil stays barely moist. Around the beginning of April, begin their revival by repotting in fresh soil, watering thoroughly and giving them a weak dose of water-soluble fertilizer. Bring them into a room with bright, filtered light and move gradually into full sun. You should give them a month of indoor growing time before moving them outdoors around mid-May.

option 3: provide winter rest for dormant bulbs

good for: alocasia, caladium, canna, colocasia, dahlia, tuberous begonia

Once they've been nipped by the first light frost, these plants will get the "end of season" message. If they have been growing in pots, you can bring them inside to a cool dark place, keeping them just barely moist through the winter. If they've been growing in the garden, dig them up, trim off the leaves and stem and allow the bulb/tuber to dry slightly. Dust off any dried soil, wrap them in newspaper or peat moss and keep slightly moist, checking throughout the winter months to make sure they aren't too dry or too wet. Temperatures for dormant bulbs/tubers need to remain about 40° to 50°. In early March clean out any dead foliage from the pots or pot up the loose bulbs in temporary pots, water well and begin fertilizing. When new shoots appear, place the pots in a sunny window to get a jump-start on growth before gradually moving them outside in mid-May.

timing a tropical transition

Once you have decided which of your summer plants to save as well as where and how they will spend the winter, its time to put your plan in motion. Your "throw-aways" can stay out with the chrysanthemums and pumpkins – we often have good weather right up to November so you can let them be, enjoy their final bloom and tip them into the compost bin when they succumb to frost. Your "keep" group will need to slowly move into a protected area with less light, take several cleansing baths and showers, be inspected for bugs and trimmed down if needed. The following step-by-step process applies to **all** of the options above with any differences noted:

- A little reminder first: Cut back on fertilizing by the end of August so that no new growth is encouraged.
- Plan to have this transition done by the time temperatures reach 50° at night because most tropical plants can't withstand temperatures below 45°. It's also important to bring plants in before you have to turn the furnace on so they can adjust to being indoors without the added stress of warm, dry air. In St. Louis our fall weather is difficult to predict, but generally speaking around October 31st we can expect low temperatures in the mid-40's – it's easy to remember Hallowe'en as a deadline!
- Begin cleaning up your selected plants in the second or third week of September. Remove any dust and debris by shaking them and then hosing them down. A light trim is okay, but you should prune no more than 1/3rd of the plant.
- Scrub the outside of the pots with dishwashing liquid, looking for slugs and spider sacs.
- Water the plants thoroughly and let them drain. Water again with an Insecticidal Soap solution of 2.5 ounces per gallon of water, or soak each pot in a tub of this solution for 15 minutes to flush out any ants, centipedes and soil-dwelling pests.
- Spray the entire plant with the Insecticidal Soap, making sure you hit the undersides of the leaves. Use the same 2.5 oz/1 gallon ratio or a ready-to-use spray bottle. Allow the foliage to dry before you move your plants.
- If you see signs of mites, aphids, mealybugs, scale, or whiteflies, treat with Neem Oil, which is also a fungicide that treats powdery mildew and rust. You might wish to re-evaluate bringing an affected plant into your house, however.
- To help your plants adapt to lower light, move them to a protected, shady place for several hours, increasing the time each day until after a week they are spending all day in shade.
- Bulb plants in pots are also treated this way but they should not be trimmed at this time.
- Take cuttings from plants you wish to propagate. Set them in a protected spot where they'll still get some morning sun.
- Meanwhile, prepare your houseplant space by cleaning the windows outside and in to maximize the available light. Check your grow-light set up and replace bulbs as needed. Gather together saucers and humidity trays.
- Week number two: time to inspect your plants again. To be proactive, you may apply an indoor Systemic Insecticide by scratching it into the soil and then watering it in. Do not use on citrus and other edible plants.
- At the end of the second week of shade, spray your plants one more time with Insecticidal Soap. Time to move inside!
- With a light frost, your bulb/tuber plants will droop and it will be time to dig them and set them in the shade to air dry.
- Once everything is indoors, follow the directions under each option for winter care – and start dreaming of Spring!