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## Over Wintering Tropical Plants in the North

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Tropical plants are plants that will not tolerate freezing temperatures. Special care is required in order to keep these plants alive from one year to the next. Overwintered tropicals generally get better and better over the years as they achieve impressive sizes with a lot of character!

The method you use to overwinter a tropical plant in a temperate climate depends on the particular plant you want to save. The general idea is to mimic the way the plant rests during its natural dormancy period without allowing it to freeze.

The following are the basic over wintering choices.

### Over wintering as a growing houseplant

Many tropicals will adapt and grow inside your house over the winter months if they get enough light and humidity.

Sunlight levels in the North are low in winter, and a sunny south-facing window in January offers a lot less light than a sunny garden location in July. A plant that you've grown in shade in the garden might need a full-sun location indoors. If there isn't enough natural light in your house from windows and skylights, consider using grow lights to boost your tropical's health.

Since heated indoor air is exceedingly dry, many tropicals can be stressed by low humidity levels. Choose the most humid room (kitchen, bathroom), run a humidifier, use water-filled pebble trays under the pots and/or group plants together to raise humidity.

Inspect your tropical for insects before bringing it in to your home in the fall to prevent unwanted house guests!

In the spring, gradually reintroduce your overwintered tropical to sunny locations or they will burn in the full May sun!

## Storing it as a bulb, corm or tuber

**Bulbs, tubers and corms** are underground storage structures with nutrients and growing points from which new stems and leaves emerge. Plants that have these types of structures usually die down in cool or dry spells and rain or warm weather will induce new growth. In order to save these plants, allow the first frost to turn the tops black or brown. Then dig with a fork or spade, cut back and remove the dying tops and any diseased areas. Allow to dry and remove as much of the soil as possible. These structures can then be stored in peat moss kept just barely moist. It is important to keep them in a dark place and at a moderate temperature of 40F to 45F to prevent them from growing. An unheated basement, garage, root cellar or winterized porch will do if these conditions are met. Examine them every month for signs of rot or decay. Discard diseased parts and spray with a bit of water to keep them from drying out too much. In early spring, pot, water and bring to a sunny, warm location to induce growth.

## Storing it as a dormant plant

You can induce many tropical plants and tender perennials – even ones that grow as shrubs and trees – into dormancy by withholding water and keeping them in a cool, dark place above 35 degrees F.

This is a great method if you do not have the space for additional house plants. Instead of keeping them in your living space while winter rages, you can store them out of the way as dormant plants in a basement, garage, or unheated porch.

Cut back the tops of **herbaceous plants** after frost has withered their tops. Then dig up the root ball and plant in appropriate size pot in a soil-less mix or just leave in its current pot for winter.

Bring **woody tropical plants** inside for storage just before a frost is expected. Dig them up and plant in appropriate size pot in a soil-less mix or just leave in its current pot for winter. Don't cut back or prune woody plants in fall.

If the plant still has leaves, they will gradually yellow and probably drop off. New leaves will grow when you return the stored plant to light and warmth in spring. That's the time to prune the plant to shape, control size and to remove any dead or damaged branches.

Keep these herbaceous and woody plants dry, but not parched over the winter. Check for moisture every two to four weeks and add a little as needed. Before planting them in their summer spot, prune and shape, fertilize, water, place them in a warm spot and gradually reintroduce them to stronger light.

## **Bananas**

These are some of the easiest tropicals to overwinter! Overwintered bananas can become extremely large and even more exotic the following season! If the banana is container grown, cut the plant down to about 4-6 inches just before you bring it indoors. Store the container in a cool, dark area. In the spring, increase watering and a new shoot will push up from the center of the stem!

If the banana was grown in the ground, dig it up before frost. Leave the soil around the roots and wrap the root ball in a plastic bag. Do not cut the plant back. Store the plant in a cool, dark location. The stem will die down naturally. In the spring, cut the old stem off and replant after danger of frost is past.

### **Collect seed or take cuttings**

This method is preferred if storage space is a problem. Size will be sacrificed, but many tropicals grow quickly from cuttings taken in late summer before plants go dormant. Take four to six inch cuttings from the growing tips, remove bottom leaves, and cut to right below the node, dip in rooting compound and place into a container with very moist sand. Covering with a plastic dome or bag that allows light to penetrate and moisture to stay inside the chamber will hasten rooting. Once a good mass of roots has formed, plant into a small container of soil-less potting medium. Water and grow on as a small houseplant until it is time to plant them outdoors.

For plants that are best propagated by seed, collect the seeds throughout the growing season as they mature, dry and store in airtight containers until it is time to sow.

Sources:

[Over-wintering Tropical and Subtropical Plants](#) by Doris Rodriguez, Chief Horticulturist  
[Container Plants](#) by Halina Heitz

[Tropical Punch!](#) Developed by Greg Stack, Extension Educator, Horticulture, U of Illinois  
[Hot Plants for Cool Climates](#) by Susan A. Roth and Dennis Schrader