

WINTER CARE OF HOUSEPLANTS

During the short days of winter, houseplant growth slows, resulting in a need to change how we care for them. Although frequent watering may have been necessary during the long days of summer, the same amount now could cause problems. Excess water fills air spaces within the soil resulting in roots that receive less oxygen than they need. Water by touch, not by calendar. If the soil is dry an inch deep, it is time to water. Be sure to add enough so that some water flows out the bottom of the pot. This will help wash out excess salts that tend to accumulate within the potting soil. Fertilization also should be reduced. Normally, it is best to apply half the amount of fertilizer for flowering houseplants and one-fourth the amount for foliage houseplants. Too much fertilizer results in plants that become leggy and weak. Location is another factor that should be considered this time of year. Since day length is so short, houseplants may be helped by being moved to areas of the room that receive more light, such as a south- or east-facing window.

Avoid placing plants where drafts from doors or direct output from heating ducts may contact them. Relative humidity also tends to be low during the winter. If you do not have a humidifier, frequent misting of the plants or placing them on water-filled trays of pebbles can help.

Winterizing Roses

Though most shrub roses are hardy in Kansas, other types of roses can be more tender. For example, the hybrid teas have certain species in their ancestry that originated in the warm climate of southern China. These roses need protection to reliably survive Kansas winters. Mound soil or compost about 8 to 10 inches high around each plant. If using soil, bring it in from another part of the garden. Do not pull it from between plants because this can damage the rose roots or make them more susceptible to cold. Mounding is normally finished by Thanksgiving. After the ground has frozen, add a 4-inch mulch of straw, leaves or hay for further protection. More soil may be spread on top of the mulch to keep it in place. Do not add the mulch before the ground freezes or mice may invade and feed on the roses over the winter. The purpose of these coverings is not only to moderate the cold, but also to prevent warm days during the winter or early spring from stimulating growth that is tender to returning cold weather. Excessively tall canes should be pruned to a height of 36 inches and tied together to prevent them from being whipped by strong winter winds. Wind can damage the crown of the plant or loosen the surrounding soil. Next spring, remove coverings before new growth starts. If soil was used for mounding, remove from the area so that the level of soil stays constant from year to year. Wait until after the ground thaws, or the tops may begin growing before the roots can provide water.

Keep Compost Pile Moist

This is the time of year when there are lots of materials available to compost. Remember that the compost needs to be kept moist so that the bacteria and fungi can break down the raw materials. Use a sprinkler to soak through the pile to the center. Allow the pile to drain. The goal is for the pile to remain moist; not waterlogged. Edges will dry out the quickest and may need a light sprinkling from time to time.

Roasting Pumpkin Seeds

Now that Halloween is past, you may be wondering what to do with the pumpkins that were used to decorate for the holiday. Consider roasting the seeds before freezing temperatures destroys the pumpkin fruit. Cut open the pumpkin and remove the seeds and stringy material. Seeds should be washed and dried and the "strings" discarded. Toss the seeds with a little oil before roasting. Flavor can be enhanced by adding a sprinkling of salt to the oiled seeds. Seeds can then be spread on a cookie sheet and roasted for about 25 minutes at 325 degrees F. Times may vary depending on the size and moisture content of the seed. Seeds are done when they turn a golden brown. If seeds are not eaten immediately, store in a zip closure bag in the refrigerator.

Draining Hoses and Irrigation Lines

Hoses and shallow irrigation lines may be damaged over the winter if water is not drained. If there is a main shut-off valve for the system, close it and then run through the zones to make sure any pressure has a chance to bleed off. Lawn irrigation systems usually have shallow lines. Though some lines may be self-draining, check to be sure there are no manual drains. If manual drains are present, they should be opened. Be sure to map them so they can be closed next spring before the system is pressurized. If there are no manual drains the system should be blown out with an air compressor. Lawn irrigation companies often offer this service. Drain hoses by stretching them out and coiling them for storage. Water will drain as you pull the hose toward you for coiling. Store in a protected place. UV light can make hoses brittle over time.