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Protecting Your Garden In Winter

By [Gemma Alexander](#)NOV 13, 2023 [fall-garden-planning](#), [Gardening](#), [Winter](#)

It's been a [record-breaking year for weather-related disasters](#), with extreme heat waves threatening [human health](#), [wildlife](#), and our [gardens](#). But even if your garden survived the summer, you can't get complacent. Winter is usually the most challenging season for garden survival.

Climate change is making severe storms and extreme low temperatures more common. Whether you have put your [garden to bed](#) for the winter, or try to [produce produce](#) all year round, you can take steps to ensure that your landscape survives the winter.

Just as you [winterize](#) your home, you need to prepare your garden for cold weather. In many climates, you will need to bring potted plants and tender perennials inside for the winter. In milder climates, place them in a sheltered, sunny spot and wrap pots with burlap or blankets.



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Fall Changes

One of the best things you can do to protect your in-ground plants in the winter is to [mulch](#) them in the fall with an organic material like compost, wood chips, or [fall leaves](#). Mulching helps protect plant roots like a blanket. You should apply winter mulch after plants have gone dormant but before the ground freezes. Water well before mulching – moist soil retains more heat and can stay [up to five degrees](#) warmer than dry soil.

Fall is a great time to [plant new trees](#) and perennials. But [hold off on pruning](#) so that you don't stimulate new growth just when plants should be going dormant. Similarly, avoid cutting back perennials until the spring. Pruning dormant perennials does not damage them. But leaving seed pods and dead stalks in place provides food and shelter for [winter wildlife](#). The mulch you put down in fall will provide shelter for overwintering insects, which are an important food source for birds. If you feed birds, switch to a species-appropriate winter suet or seed mix.

If you have too much winter wildlife, consider wrapping the lower trunks of small trees to prevent critters from gnawing on the bark.

Cold Snaps

Even cold-hardy plants can be done in by sudden steep drops in temperature, or temperatures that are well below the normal lows for your area. USDA hardiness zones, or [growing zones](#), are based on the average winter minimum temperatures in an area. Hopefully, you already [know what zone you live in](#) and have selected mostly [native plants](#) and varieties that are hardy in your zone. When unusually cold weather is predicted, you can protect sensitive plants – that is ones, that are not hardy at the predicted temperatures – by [covering them](#) with old sheets and blankets. Cloches can protect smaller plants. Be sure to remove covers when temperatures rise again to avoid overheating.

Although wet soil takes longer to freeze, full pipes are likely to burst in freezing temperatures. Before a hard freeze, disconnect and drain your hoses and irrigation systems.

Winter Storms

Although it's too late to do regular pruning in the winter, after a storm, prune out damaged branches. Clean cuts will heal better than torn edges. When it's time for regular pruning next season, learn how to [properly prune trees](#). Strategic pruning can prevent future damage from heavy winds and snow, while incorrect pruning can make damage more likely.

If your area is prone to windstorms, put away all garden furniture in the fall instead of simply covering it. Lightweight trellises and other small structures should be laid flat on the ground before a windstorm. If your garden is repeatedly damaged by wind, plan to plant a [windbreak](#) next season – this can help conserve energy in the home as well.

If you live somewhere that gets a lot of snow all at once, protect newly planted trees with a wooden shelter or tented covering that keeps the snow off of them before the snow begins to fall. Narrow, upright evergreens with multiple leaders may benefit from tying to prevent splayed branches and breakage under the weight of snow and ice.

After a storm, knock snow off of greenhouses and small structures so they don't collapse, and from any straining branches that you can safely reach. But don't give in to the temptation to clear away all the snow. [Snowblowers](#) are not only polluting, but the heavy, compacted snow they toss around can break branches on shrubs and crush smaller plants. Plus, a [layer of snow](#) can benefit plants, acting as an insulator that traps warm air. It can even fertilize plants when allowed to melt naturally (because snow [picks up atmospheric nitrogen](#) as it falls). Choose an [ecofriendly de-icer](#) to protect plants and animals from harmful chemicals.

A Little Preparation Delivers Spring Joy

In a harsh winter, some damage and plant loss may be inevitable. But with careful planning and good maintenance, you can enjoy the winter – whether that means [reading good books](#) inside your cozy home or getting outside and [hitting the slopes](#) – secure in the knowledge that your garden will [bloom again in the spring](#).



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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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