Home/Garden

Understanding methods aids in winter plant pro

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Editor's note: This is the completion of an article that appeared on this page November 12.

Winter protection of plants can be accomplished with various methods and materials. Understanding why certain methods work for different plants will help you decide what to do. You can mulch, screen, cover and hill and now is the time to be sure all of this is accomplished.

By now the ground has probably frozen a little, or soon will be. In any case, by Thanksgiving the soil temperatures in our area drop to about 40 degrees F and most root growth stops. Plants have become dormant, "asleep" for the winter, and are ready to be covered.

Dwarf varieties of evergreens, rhododendrons and new plantings of conifers tend to have shallow or undeveloped root systems. Winter winds can dehydrate the leaves faster than the roots replenish the moisture. The shallow roots often don't penetrate below the top layer of frozen soil to obtain water. To complicate the problem, alternate freezing and thawing can injure and kill root tissue and heave plants right out of the ground. This often accounts for poor survival of unprotected herbaceous perennials. Judicious mulching can solve these problems.

Mulch helps to stabilize soil temperature and prevent alternate freezing and thawing. Two important points to remember about mulching, however, are to use only about 3- to 4-inches and to keep it pulled away a few inches from the base of woody plants. The root systems of plants need oxygen and moisture. Mulch piled too thickly can impede the supply of air and water to the roots, suffocating the plant. Likewise, the bark of woody plants needs air and light to function properly and to resist infection. Accumulated mulch of 5 inches or more pushed right up to the base of shrubs and trees can encourage the formation of stem cankers and restrict the growth of trunks.

Herbaceous perennials should be completely dormant before you mulch them. Wait until the ground has frozen a little or they may continue to grow under the covering of leaves or straw. For their good health, they need to rest. After mulching with 3- to 6-inches of a loose, airy leaf cover, the more tender perennials can be further protected with evergreen boughs. A few inches of stubble left when you cut back perennials will help to catch blowing leaves. Consider leaving whole stalks of some perennials to etch dramatic lines in the wintry landscape and to catch snow for added protection. If nature always provided a reliable cover of dry, fluffy snow just after the ground froze, we wouldn't have to be so concerned with do-it-yourself mulching. Of course, we never know just when or how much it will snow.

Before the ground freezes hard, think about plants that may need protection from the wind. Drive stakes into the ground where you plan to stretch burlap windbreaks, or where you will erect a snow fence to deter huge drafts of snow from piling up in the wrong places. If some of your plants grow where heavy loads of snow and ice may threaten to break their branches, prepare to cover them with sheltering frames of lath or plywood. Remember that, even in the winter, shrubs and trees need light and air circulation. Never use plastic to wrap plants.

A wrap of burlap will let in some light and air; but be sure to leave it open at the top and bottom. A windscreen of burlap can be set close to a plant in an "L" shape, with the angle pointed into the prevailing winds.

Not all plants need this protection. The conditions in your microclimate will determine whether you should take these precautions. For instance, if you have had repeated problems with forsythia failing to bloom in the spring, except on the lower branches of the plant where it was protected by snow, you might want to wrap or screen it with burlap this year. Forsythia forms its flower buds in the summer and if it is exposed to particularly harsh winter winds and dry conditions, the buds may be killed.

If a rhododendron suffers from windburn and sunscald, a burlap screen may help prevent these winter injuries. If the fall has been dry, another maintenance strategy is to water plants thoroughly before the ground freezes so they will head into winter with reserves of moisture.

Alternatively, you might want to reconsider the types of plants occu-

Versatile hemlock toughens with age

From WOOD
A Meredith Magazine

In the last century, the bark of hemlock was sometimes worth more than the wood.

According to Wood Magazine, the leather-tanning and [illegible] processing industries demanded hemlock bark for its high tannic acid content. Hides and skins infused with a tannic acid solution become soft and strong. Tragically, stands of hemlock in the eastern United States and Canada were stripped of their bark, then left on the stump to die.

It wasn't until the '40s boom in wood-frame house construction that hemlock came into its own as lumber. And then, the eastern hemlock's West Coast cousin provided the raw material. Today, hemlock lumber from Oregon, Washington and British Columbia (where the species is represented in 60 coastal forests) feeds home construction and millwork manufacturers. Hemlock even gives some hardwoods a run for their money as a lower-cost, yet strong, easy-to-work furniture stock. In fact, this softwood actually grows harder with age.

Botanist Stephen L. Endlicher christened hemlock in 1847 with the genus name Tsuga. The Japanese word means "yew-leaved," referring to its short, flat and, contrary to legend, non-poisonous needles.

Eastern hemlock, *Tsuga*

Growing to greater size than its eastern relative, which only becomes 80- feet tall and 36-inches in diameter in 250 years, western hemlock represents one of the lumber industry's few remaining sources of large, clear timber. Trees 100 years old can be 150-feet tall with a 24-inch diameter.

The bark of both hemlock species appears cinnamon-red to brown in color and has broad, deep ridges. Seed-bearing brown cones sprout at the ends of branch shoots.

Hemlock can be worked easily with hand or power tools. In crosscutting, however, expect some tearout.

The construction industry now frames, sheathes and floors with hemlock. Mills turn the wood into windows, frame-and-panel doors, molding and paneling. Due to its

Up from the pits or garbage gardening

Dinner is done and it's time to clear the table. Scraps can go to pets and the compost pile, but you might want to take a second look at the avocado pit or orange seed with the idea of increasing your collection of houseplants.

Pat Leuchtman
Between The Rows

Many people who have nurtured seeds from the dinner table into healthy plan- will off-handedly refer to their efforts as "garbage gardening"; Debbie Peterson and some like-minded souls in New York take a slightly classier view of the process and founded The Rare Pit and Plant Council. This classy and smart group got first got together at the National Avocado Pit Growers Contest held at the Gramercy Park Flower Show in 1972. Those 300 avocado trees inspired them to look at other pits that could be grown as houseplants.

Peterson may be one of the founders of the Rare Pit and Plant Council, but she has been caring for plants — and people — for many years. She says she is retired from her business as a landscape designer, but gardeners never really retire. Nowadays, she oversees the garden at St. Luke of the Fields on Barrow Street in Greenwich Village, coordinating the efforts of 18 volunteers including an artist who tends his topiary animals, to make this small public garden (open on weekends) a real oasis of spiritual refreshment amid the hurly burly of the city.

While discovering the joys of cultivating carob, mango, kumquat, litchi, cherimoya and other exotic tropicals, Debbie sat down with Milicent Selsam, author of many respected and popular books for children on natural history, and wrote the Adult Grow it Book of Houseplants. That is no longer in print, but as editor of the RP&PC Newsletter, "The Pits", she gives simple and practical advice to growing pits, aided by the knowledge and wit of other members. I must say that The Pits is not only informative, it is charming, amusing and totally enjoyable.

There are some general rules to growing exotic pits successfully. First, buy fresh and very ripe fruit. Pits from fruit that is slightly over the hill will give you best results.

Plant the pit as soon after eating as possible because these seeds have a short viability.

Start the pit in a potted Jiffy pellet or small pot filled with a sterile potting medium. If you have a large pit or tuber you can fill a reclosable plastic lunch bag with damp peat moss or sphagnum moss. Make sure the pit is completely surrounded by the damp peat or sphagnum and seal the bag. Check it frequently to make sure it hasn't dried out. Eventually you'll see roots developing; when they are 4 inches long, the pit can be transplanted to a pot that is 1 inch larger than the pit.

All pits require bottom heat to germinate — temperatures between 70 and 80 degrees are ideal. You can provide this heat by setting your pits on top of the TV, the refrigerator, on top of light units you use for other plants or horticultural heating cables.

Transplant seedlings when they have their second set of true leaves. Use a three-to-four inch pot and sterile potting medium. If you used a jiffy pellet, remove the plastic netting which will impede growth of the roots. Grow young seedling in indirect bright light and keep them evenly moist, not soggy. Once a week water with a dilute, evenly balanced fertilizer, 20-20-20.

I have seen many avocado plants, but never a carob, even though many of my friends are famous for their carob brownies. The Rare Pit and Plant Council provides fascinating information about carob and its culture.

Carob has an ancient history. Sometimes it's called St. John's bread because St. John the Baptist ate the pulp of the pods while he wandered in the desert. The plant is slow growing and well suited to the dry conditions of our heated homes. New foliage is coppery pink, turning dark green and leathery. Carob flowers appear in the fall and are self pollinating so it will fruit for the windowsill gardener.

Carob pods look like flat brown lima beans and it may take a little work to get the hard black pit out of the pod. Nick the pit with sandpaper or a file and soak for several days until the pit swells. Following the general directions above, plant the soaked pit and it will sprout in about two weeks.

Carob is famous for its chocolatey flavor but it has been used as animal fodder since ancient times. During the Depression, Seventh Day Adventists in Pasadena, California planted 2000 carob trees to provide free nutritous snacks for children.

If you are interested in the Rare Pit and Plant Council and would like a subscription to The Pits, their monthly newsletter that includes all kinds of fascinating (and sometimes weird) information about exotic seeds and pits, tips on growing and even a few recipes send your $10 check to Debbie Peterson, 251 West 11th St., New York, NY 10014.