



Gardeners Information Service

WINTER PROTECTION FOR STANDARD ROSES

What is the best way to overwinter standard roses in Michigan?

—D.S., GROSSE POINTE, MICHIGAN

Roses pruned into tree form need special attention in the winter since they are not as cold-hardy as other roses and because they have a graft union that needs protection. Prepare the rose for winter by pruning back all the branches to about one foot long. In late fall, dig up the plants after the first killing frost—but before the ground freezes—and lay them horizontally in a previously prepared trench. If your standard roses are in a pot, you can put the roses, pots and all, in the trench. If the pots are fragile or of special value, simply remove them. Bury the roses completely under soil. When the ground freezes, mulch over the trench.

Next spring, keep an eye on the hardy roses outdoors. When their buds start to swell, it's time to dig up your standard roses and replant them in the garden.

CARING FOR CALADIUMS

I'm having a difficult time keeping or even growing caladiums in my Midwest garden. Last spring I planted 100 bulbs, but they looked terrible and more than half of them rotted. What am I doing wrong?

—L.M., IVANHOE, ILLINOIS

Caladiums thrive in well-drained, organic-rich soil that is kept evenly moist during the growing season. They grow best at 75 degrees Fahrenheit or above and in a shady site that is protected from strong winds. If you put your tubers in the ground before the soil warmed up last year, that could have caused your problems with rot. It is also possible that you planted them too deep—no more than two inches is optimal.

To prepare caladiums for overwintering, begin to reduce any supplemental watering around the end of August. When the leaves die down, dig the tubers and let them “cure” or air-dry for a couple of days in a cool, dry spot. Then store them in a dry room where the temperature stays between 55 and 65 de-

grees over the winter, such as an unheated, attached garage or basement.

In February or March, pot individual tubers in new soil with lots of organic matter, water them, and move them to a warm, bright place. As the roots begin to fill the pots, transplant them into larger and larger containers. In May, or when the soil in your area has warmed up, plant them outside. If you don't ever let them get really dry, they should perform well.

OVERWINTERING A FIG INDOORS

I live in central Wisconsin (USDA Hardiness Zone 4, AHS Heat Zone 4). This spring I bought a young 'Brown Turkey' fig, which has spent the summer thriving in a large pot on my patio. How should I care for it during the winter? I would like to bring it inside and keep it in a sunroom that has radiant-heat floors, but I'm afraid it might not go dormant. Should it be moved before or after it loses its leaves?

—P.S., RUDOLPH, WISCONSIN

If you move your brown turkey fig (*Ficus carica* 'Brown Turkey') to its winter position before the leaves drop and can keep your sunroom at about 55 degrees Fahrenheit, you might succeed in the somewhat tricky process of keeping the fig alive through the winter.

However, most experts advise overwintering figs in a dormant state when they are grown in regions outside their hardiness zones (USDA Zones 7 to 9). Like many fruit trees, figs need a period of chilling in order to produce fruit the following season. As the growing season comes to a close, embryonic fruits that will mature next year are already developing close to the end of the shoots; these pea-size figs-to-be need to be protected from the cold.

Your best option is to wait until the plant goes dormant and then move it to a place that

is dimly lit and stays between 40 and 50 degrees—perhaps a friend or neighbor would be willing to let you store it in his or her garage. If you store it in this way, be sure to water the root ball once in a while during the winter months.

STEVIA

I am looking for information on the plant known as “honey leaf” or “sweet leaf” (*Stevia rebaudiana*). Do you have any information on its culture, history, and any known adverse affects from consuming it? I've started several plants from seed, and the plants are now ready for transplanting.

—G.R., VIA THE INTERNET

Native to Paraguay and Brazil, stevia (*Stevia rebaudiana*) is a shrubby herbaceous perennial that reaches a height of two or more feet when fully mature. It has an extensive root system and brittle stems and grows well in a wide range of soils given consistent moisture and good drainage. It must be grown as an annual or container plant in most of the United States.

Natives of various South American ethnic groups are said to have used the plant's leaves as a sweetener since pre-Columbian days. It was approved as a sweetener 25 years ago in Japan, and several companies produce a sweetening agent extracted from the plant that is sold worldwide.

In its natural form, the herb is reportedly 10 to 15 times as sweet as sugar and, according to some experts, does not affect blood sugar metabolism. Although there is no known health hazard associated with its use as a sweetener, laboratory research on animals has indicated that steviol, a byproduct of stevia, may cause birth defects. Women who are pregnant or trying to become pregnant should probably avoid using stevia until scientists have fully investigated its safety.

Stevia is currently sold in the United States as a dietary supplement, but not as a food additive.

WE'RE READY TO HELP:

For answers to your gardening questions, call Gardeners Information Service at (800) 777-7931, ext. 131, between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Eastern time, or e-mail us anytime at gis@ahs.org.

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