



Gardeners Information Service

OVERWINTERING TREES AND SHRUBS

I have several potted trees and shrubs that I haven't been able to plant because the space isn't prepared. Now that it's too late to plant, will they stay alive through the winter if I keep them in a dimly lit, unheated garage? Or would it be better to bury them as deeply as possible in a mulch pile outside?

—M.M., COLUMBUS, OHIO

Assuming all these plants are winter hardy in your region, the mulch pile would be a much better choice than the garage. The best solution, however, would be to temporarily plant—"heel-in," as horticulturists term it—the trees and shrubs for the winter. To do this, select a protected site and dig a hole just deep enough for each potted root ball—avoid low-lying areas where water might collect. Fill soil back in firmly around the pot. After the ground freezes, add a two- to three-inch-deep layer of mulch to the top of the soil around the base of each plant to reduce the chance of frost heave. In spring, move the plants to their permanent location as soon as you can work the soil.

ORCHID PSEUDOBBULBS

I am repotting a *Stanhopea* orchid that has a number of older, leafless pseudobulbs. If I divide and repot the pseudobulbs, will they grow new pseudobulbs with leaves?

—L.A., SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

One factor that influences whether or not pseudobulbs—the thickened, bulblike, fleshy stems of certain orchids—will grow is age; the older they are, the less likely they are to produce new growth. And if they have been buried in soil for a long period of time, they may have started to rot. The only way to find out if they are still viable is to plant them.

"I recommend keeping the pseudobulbs in pairs and placing them in pots just big enough in diameter to hold them," says Andy Easton,

director of education at the American Orchid Society. "Then fill the pots with sphagnum moss or coconut fiber and move them to a shaded, warm location." Easton advises waiting until mid-February to remove pseudobulbs from the parent plant.

The genus *Stanhopea* is known for the unusual growth characteristics of its pseudobulbs. The ovoid, dark green pseudobulb sends out a single, heavily veined leaf that produces a flower stalk from the underside and grows downward. For this reason, *Stanhopea* orchids are usually grown in hanging wire baskets.

MAINTAINING VINCA

We have a 30-year-old, south-facing bank of periwinkle (*Vinca minor*). It's generally in good shape, but after flowering has stopped the leaves seem to show evidence of disease. There is some browning of edges—actually, a silverish tinge as well. Could this be related to the layer of oak leaves that lands on it each fall?

—L.C., MADISON, WISCONSIN

Periwinkle (*Vinca minor*) thrives in shade but in the north will tolerate full sun. In this situation, however, the foliage may discolor. Though unattractive, the discoloration will not kill the plant. Cutting periwinkle back hard in the early spring will rid plants of the foliage from the previous year and promote new growth. One simple way to do this is to run a lawn mower set at the highest cutting level over the bed each spring just before new growth normally starts to develop.

If the oak leaves you mention fall thickly enough to form a dense mat over the periwinkle, they may be holding in too much moisture, thus providing optimal conditions for fungal diseases to flourish. Removing the majority of the oak leaves promptly once they fall may help reduce your foliage problems. But don't be too fastidious in cleaning them up, because they are probably providing a


regular source of slowly decomposing organic matter for the periwinkle.

CUTTING BACK PERENNIALS

I have always wondered: Exactly when should I cut back herbaceous perennials? I know I can cut back plants that turn brown, but last year, my heucheras, geraniums, and some others never turned brown. In early spring, when I finally trimmed back bedraggled foliage, these plants were still green. I couldn't help but feel I was removing leaves that had waited all winter and were ready to grow.

—E.M., ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA

Most horticulturists suggest pruning herbaceous perennials back in late fall or early winter to reduce the chance of cutting off new growth in early spring and to remove old plant tissue that could harbor pests and diseases. This is especially important if your plants have excessive pest damage or have diseased flowers or foliage. In general, you should wait until the plants have died back before pruning them. If the fall and winter are mild, many semi-evergreen plants stay green. Wait until after several hard frosts and then remove only damaged, dry foliage. Unless the plants were diseased or pest-ridden, compost the plant debris.

But seed heads of some perennials are very attractive and add interest to the garden during winter, when there's not much else to look at. They also provide food and nesting materials for wildlife. Some gardeners like to leave some seed heads standing through the winter (see "Deadheading Reconsidered," page 40). If the plants are healthy, leaving the seed heads over winter will not significantly affect future performance. Just remove last year's dead stems before new shoots begin to emerge. 

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