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Wintering over Geraniums

“Never trust a man or a woman who is not passionately devoted to geraniums.”

— Beverley Nichols, Merry Hall

I've spent the last few weeks working feverously to get the last of my crops in before we have a real hard frost. After we get a hard frost, I can dig up all my dahlias, begonias, cannas, and elephant ears. Between reaping the last of my crops and waiting for the frost, I like to take cuttings of some of my more unique coleus to propagate for next year's gardens. If I have time, I will save some of other filler plants as well. There is one plant that I always find time to save and that is my geraniums. When I was kid living with my grandmother, she regularly would bring in her bright red geraniums and store them in their terracotta pots in the basement windows. We'd water them every couple weeks or so and by spring, they looked pretty shabby. However, once they came out of the basement and were pruned, they perked up quickly.

Wintering over geraniums is not difficult and there are several different techniques you can use depending on how much room you have. Geraniums can be overwintered by (1) potting up individual plants, (2) taking cuttings, and (3) storing the bare roots in a cool, dry place. Key is to do it before the first frost.

The first technique is easy to do but requires the most space. Simply pot up the plants, water them thoroughly and place them in a sunny window where the indoor temps are preferably between 60- and 65-degrees Fahrenheit. Water the plants about every two weeks. In March, prune the geraniums back by one-half to two-thirds. They'll begin to grow back in a few days and by May, you should have nice plants to put outside. I tend to use this technique the most as I have the window space for the geraniums.

The second technique is to take cuttings. I like to do this on some of leggier geraniums that I didn't do a good job of pruning over the summer. Simply take stem cuttings that are three to four inches from the tip of the shoots. Fill pots or flats that have drainage holes with a soil-less rooting medium, vermiculite or a mixture of perlite and sphagnum peat moss. Remove the lower leaves and then dip the end in rooting hormone. Place the cutting far enough into the medium so that it self-supporting and water well. Allow the medium, then place a plastic bag or dome over the cuttings to prevent wilting. Place the pots in a location where they will receive bright, indirect light. In about six to eight weeks, they should have a good root system and you can pot them up into individual pots. Return the pots to their bright, indirect light location and until spring.

The third technique is to store them as bare-root plants. I must admit I've had limited success, but I believe it is because I didn't have my geraniums stored in the right location. Dig up the plant and shake off the soil. Place one or two plants in a paper bag and store them in a dry, cool location about 45 to 50 degrees Fahrenheit), such as an unheated porch or garage. You can also simply hang them upside down. The foliage and shoot tips will die over winter. In March, prune or cut back the plant to the firm, green, live stem. Then pot up the plants, water thoroughly, and place in a sunny window. Come May, you should have beautiful plants to put out in your garden.

Take the time to try one or all these techniques to overwinter your geraniums this fall. It's a great way to learn a new gardening technique and save a little money next spring.

This week's article is written by Jeannie Manis, a Wisconsin Certified Sauk County Master Gardener Volunteer. If you have any gardening questions, please contact the Extension Sauk County by emailing to tripp@wisc.edu or calling the University of Wisconsin Madison Division of Extension Sauk County office at 608-355-3250.