



Keeping Geraniums Over Winter

Here in Montana and in all but the warmest, frost-free corners of our country, Geraniums (*Pelargonium x hortorum*) are grown as ordinary annuals. In truth, they are tender perennials that can be over wintered in several different ways. For any over wintering method, it is very important that the Geraniums have not suffered any exposure to frost. Frost causes tissue damage that they cannot recover from. Bring them inside well before temperatures drop to the frost range. Be sure to inspect them for insects or disease and either cure them or don't bring them inside.

A room with good light and cool temperatures (below 60°F but not freezing) will provide great conditions for Geraniums. Water them sparingly, keeping the soil barely moist. Over watering is why most gardeners fail at over wintering Geraniums. It is also important they receive adequate light all winter. Geraniums need bright light but not direct sun. You should be able to read this sheet easily in the room without artificial light. You can cut the whole plant back by about 1/3rd but you do not have to. The advantage to cutting the plant back is that you will be able to pinch and shape the plant as it grows. You may see flower buds form and you can pinch those off to encourage the plant to save energy.

Keep spent leaves and flowers cleaned out so pests and diseases don't move in. We encourage treating your plants with systemic type pesticides before you bring them inside and during the winter to avoid insect problems. About February 15th, move the plants to a warm and bright location in the house. They need steady temperatures above 68°F now. You can let them flower and enjoy the display.

If you have neither the space nor ideal conditions for over wintering Geraniums, you can also turn to an old and reliable method known as the 'old paper bag trick'. Because modern Geraniums come from species native to very dry areas of the world, they can drop their leaves and conserve water in their thick, succulent stems long enough to get through winter. You can force your plants into artificial dormancy by withholding water over the winter. Water and keep the Geraniums healthy until you are ready to prepare them to over winter.

Before the first frost, dig the Geraniums up and bring them inside. Shake away all the dirt you can at this time. Examine the plants carefully for any signs of pests or disease. Discard any infected plants. For a week or so, allow the plants to dry in the open air. Remove all soil from the roots and place each Geranium in a paper grocery bag. Staple or tie the end shut.

Store the Geranium in the bag in a cool (but not freezing) and dry place. A basement is generally better than an attic. Check on the plants regularly. The leaves will turn yellow and dry up but the stems should not. If the stems appear to be drying out, mist them lightly with water. If you see mold or rot, the plants are too wet and need a drier location. Cut out any moldy or rotted spots and leave the bags open for a day or two to dry out.

Early in spring, around March 1st, take the plants out of the bags. Prune away any dried or unhealthy tissue and pot the Geraniums in fresh potting soil. Water them well and put them in a sunny window. The soil should always dry out between watering. Feed them with half strength water-soluble fertilizer such as 20-20-20.

The Geraniums should begin to grow again and be ready to harden off and place outside about the time you would have been purchasing new ones. Put them outdoors when all danger of frost is past. Put them out at first for only a few hours at a time and out of direct sunlight. Increase the amount of time and light gradually over a week or so. They can be very long-lived plants, sometimes living decades or more.