

Winterizing Your Water Garden

Fall Jobs To Get Your Pond Ready For Winter

What you do in the fall to get your water garden ready for winter can have a big impact on how much – or how little – trouble you'll have the following year. There are four key areas to address when winterizing the water garden – the plants, the fish, the equipment and the pond itself. Let's look at them one by one.

The Plants

These fit into two main groups, tropicals and hardy plants. Tropicals won't survive our freezing winters, so you can either move them inside for the winter or let them die and buy new ones the following year.

The best way to store tropicals such as tropical waterlilies, taro or papyrus is to place them in an indoor water garden near a sunny window or under grow lights for the winter. If you don't have a large aquarium or "official" indoor water garden, a small pool or any leak-proof container will do. Just get them inside before the temperatures begin getting chilly in October. One other possibility is to store tropicals by letting them dry down, washing off the soil, wrapping the tubers in damp newspaper and storing over the winter in a covered plastic container filled with peat moss or perlite. A dark, cool place is best. Few of our customers who have tried this approach, though, have been successful. So if you really want to save a tropical, we suggest you keep them in water inside over the winter.

Non-hardy oxygenators such as cabomba and hornwort and non-hardy floating plants such as water lettuce and water hyacinths are best removed and tossed. If you let them in the pond all winter, they'll rot and gunk up the pond. Anacharis – another popular oxygenating plant – is generally hardy here and can be left in the pond over winter to regrow again in the spring.

Hardy aquatic plants can simply be cut off in the fall to an inch or two and stored about 18 inches deep in the pond throughout winter. Do this right after frost browns out the foliage.

This care includes marginals such as water iris, sweet flag, water parsley, cattails and most rushes and sedges (move them off the shelf to the slightly deeper water) as well as submerged plants such as hardy water lilies, lotus, parrot feather and pickerel plants.

If you don't have a depth of 18" or if your pond is above ground, store plants damp (pot and all) in a cooler or plastic bag inside at temperatures between 40° and 45° degrees.

The Fish

So long as the average water temperature is above 60°, feed fish a high-protein, low-carbohydrate fish food once or twice a day. As the water temperature drops below 60°, switch to a low-protein, high-carbohydrate food and cut back on the frequency, eventually to just two or three times a week as the water cools closer to 50°.

When the average water temperature drops below 50°, stop feeding altogether – no matter how badly your fish "beg" for food. Fish go into a semi-dormant state in cold water and cannot digest food.

Figure average water temperature by checking it morning, afternoon and evening and averaging the readings. Small goldfish can survive most winters in as little as 18" of water. Larger goldfish and koi are fine in 18" – 24" of water.

Winterizing Your Water Garden

If you don't have those depths or if your water garden is above ground, move your fish to an indoor aquarium over winter (preferably using pond water to aid acclimatization)

The Equipment

After your plants are readied for winter, disconnect and drain tubes, pipes, ultraviolet sterilizers and fountains. Store inside. Above-ground filters also should be drained, cleaned and stored inside. Submerged pumps should be cleaned and stored over the winter in the bottom of the pond. If you prefer to remove the pump magnet-drive types can be stored dry inside, but oil-filled types should be stored inside in a bucket of water to prevent their seals from cracking. If you're unsure about which type of pump you have, check the owner's manual.

Some people let their pumps run over the winter, which can make for some spectacular icy waterfall scenes. Just be careful that the ice doesn't build up so much that water drains over the ice and out of the pond area. Also be aware that iced-up water features may push rocks out of position, sometimes even ones that are mortared into place.

One piece of equipment you'll want to add if you're letting fish in the pond is a pond heater (sometimes call a "de-icer")

A pond heater is a thermostatically controlled, floating unit that keeps a small hole thawed out all winter. This lets methane gas escape that otherwise could build up in ice-sealed water to levels that could kill fish.

Water gardeners who have submerged pumps that move at least 350 gallons of water per hour can keep a hole open by setting the pump so that it bubbles water up through the water surface.

If your pond freezes solid over the winter, don't whack a hole in the ice with a hammer or other tool. The shock waves can harm fish. Instead, set a pot of hot water over the ice to melt an opening.

The Pond

Your biggest fall job in the pond itself is cleaning dead vegetation out of the pond and preventing leaves from dropping into it. Plant material will rot in the water and cause a buildup of methane and hydrogen sulfide gases as it decays. It's also a breeding ground for various harmful bacteria.

If you've only got an inch or so of "gunk" on the bottom of your pond, you may be able to scoop or vacuum it out. Two inches or more and you're best off draining the pond and giving it a thorough cleaning.

To keep leaves from blowing into the pond in fall, stretch netting across the pond. Use a floating ball or stakes laid across the pond to keep the net from sagging into the water. You don't want leaves steeping into the water. Shake leaves off every few day.

Head off algae by adding a bit of cold-weather beneficial bacteria to the pond, such as Microbe Lift. If you use barley straw, fall is a good time to remove the old bales and replace them with fresh ones.

That should do it. Now take a rest and dream about how great your water garden will look next summer.