

Nov-Dec 2017 Newsletter

"If it is true that one of the greatest pleasures of gardening lies in looking forward, then the planning of next year's beds and borders must be one of the most agreeable occupations in the gardener's calendar. This should make October and November particularly pleasant months, for then we may begin to clear our borders, to cut down those sodden and untidy stalks, to dig up and increase our plants, and to move them to other positions where they will show up to greater effect. People who are not gardeners always say that the bare beds of winter are uninteresting; gardeners know better, and take even a certain pleasure in the neatness of the newly dug, bare, brown earth." - Vita Sackville-West



Overwintering "Geraniums" Without Torturing Them

By Larry Hodgson,
The Laidback Gardener

When I was a very young child, my father always overwintered his "zonal geraniums" (actually, they are zonal pelargoniums) in the time-honoured tradition, by knocking the soil off their roots and hanging them upside down in the root cellar. Then when we, like so many 1960s families, "redid the basement," putting in a family room, extra bedrooms, etc... Extra insulation was added and the root cellar, now seen as a source of undesirable cold, moist air, disappeared. After all, who needed a root cellar anymore? We all had refrigerators!

But his pelargoniums didn't like the change. I can well remember them, now hanging upside down near his workbench, with newspaper spread underneath to catch all the falling leaves. By spring, there was little life left in them and many simply died. Even the best never recovered fully from the shock. He soon stopped overwintering pelargoniums and took up starting new ones from

seed. Problem solved.

What Went Wrong? Gardeners still try the old method, following methods handed down over the generations, and the results can still be pretty pathetic. Sometimes old methods are just great, but other times, they're simply ... wrong!

First, hanging pelargoniums upside down was never a good idea. People used to think it "directed energy from the roots back to the stems," but nowadays, we know that's nonsense! There's no logical reason to turn any plant upside down for extended periods. Nor was knocking all the soil off their roots of any use: that just exposes roots to drying air and usually kills them, forcing the plant, if it survives, to produce new ones. This "upside down exposed roots" thing was just bad horticulture. Essentially, it was plant torture.

Secondly, it must be said that pelargoniums don't much like being forced into dormancy. It's simply not a normal state for them. Of course, the zonal pelargonium (*P. x hortorum*) is a hybrid species and never existed in the wild, but its parent species (*P. zonale* and *P. inquinans*, both from South Africa) were small, somewhat succulent shrubs that



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never went dormant. During dry periods, their growth slowed down, but didn't stop, and they kept most of their leaves, living off moisture stored in their thick stems.

When forced into full dormancy (when you both withhold water and light from them), zonal geraniums will put up with it if necessary (like any plant, they'll do their best to try and survive), but they won't be happy campers.

Our parents and grandparents had better luck keeping pelargoniums dormant than we do because they stored them in root cellars, where it was very cold (usually less than 50° F/10° C), but above freezing, and where humidity was extremely high: about 90 to 95%. Thus the plants lost little moisture to the air.

In most situations where you could store pelargoniums these days, though, the air is going to be very dry, adding another layer of stress to the plants' already dire situation. No wonder so many pelargoniums stored this way are so weak come spring they simply die when repotted.

If you want to force your pelargonium into dormancy, at least do so logically. A garage or cool basement where temperatures remain in the 40 to 50° F (5 to 10° C) range would be best. And try not to expose the roots to the open air, inevitably very dry. When you dig the plant up in the garden, it's best to leave the root ball intact and to put it in a paper bag or to wrap it in newspaper to reduce water loss. If the plant was growing in a pot, leave it there, bringing it indoors pot and all. The room can be completely dark, as now the plant will be fully dormant.

During the winter, spray the rootstock or water it lightly once a month so as to maintain a minimum amount of moisture. You'll still need to spread a newspaper under the plant or put it in a cardboard box to catch its falling leaves, but it won't likely lose all of them.

Come spring (mid- to late March in many climates), repot the plant and move it in front of a sunny window or under plant lights and begin watering again, slowly at first, then more as new growth appears. Start fertilizing as well. By early summer, it should have recuperated and be ready to plant outdoors.

The following method of maintaining pelargoniums over the winter has always been the safest and most successful: simply keep it growing in front of a bright window or under lights. This best reproduces the conditions that pelargoniums received in the wild.

With this method, simply clean the plant a little when you bring it indoors, removing dead and yellow leaves and dried flowers. Also, spray the leaves in soapy water (1 teaspoon of insecticidal soap per quart of water (5 ml per litre) to kill any insects that are trying to hitch a ride indoors and likewise give the roots a 15-minute soak in soapy water for the same reason. If you dug it out of the garden or a container, pot it up. You may also want to pinch the stems tips (i.e. remove the terminal bud) in order to stimulate better branching, as that will give a fuller-looking plant.

Now place the pot at room temperature (anywhere between 40° F and 80° F [5° C and 25° C] will do) in front of the sunniest possible window or under intense artificial lighting, setting it on a saucer to catch any excess water.

Over the winter, water as needed when the soil is dry to the touch. Note that the frequency of watering can vary enormously according to the growing conditions: from as often as once every five days to as little as once every three weeks. (The cooler the room and the greater the air humidity, the less water the plant will need.) Put off fertilizing for a while: "feeding" a pelargonium when the light is low, as it likely will be most of the winter, can lead to it stretching for the light (etiolation). Resume fertilization (with an all-purpose product) in March, when the days begin to seriously lengthen.

Your windowsill pelargonium will thrive throughout the winter and will even bloom, but not as heavily as it did outdoors, because winter lighting is usually less intense.

Regardless of the method used to maintain your pelargonium over the winter, you'll still have to acclimatize it to outdoor conditions before planting it out for the summer. Once there is no risk of frost, place the plant outdoors in shade for first three or four days, then in partial shade for another three or four days, before placing it in full sun, its preferred condition, although partial shade will do. With this kind care, your pelargonium should bloom abundantly right through the summer.

That said, windowsill pelargoniums will still generally be much more attractive and floriferous in the summer than those spent the winter in forced dormancy: it isn't easy for a plant used to growing all year to fully recover from forced dormancy!

Attractive Bark In Winter Landscapes

Dr. Leonard Perry,
University of Vermont

The short, grey days of winter in the north, coupled with snow, often create landscapes that resemble a black and white photo. Winter landscapes need not be drab and dreary, and can have color, by choosing plants for interesting bark.

One of my favorite shrubs for its bright red stems is the Red-osier dogwood (*Cornus sericea*). For even better color than the species, look for the cultivars (cultivated varieties) 'Cardinal', 'Arctic Fire', and my favorite — Baton Rouge. 'Flaviramea' is a common yellow-stemmed cultivar of this species, but it is not as colorful nor as resistant to stem cankers as the Tatarian dogwood 'Bud's Yellow' (*Cornus alba*). For a combination of colors, try the less common Bloodtwig dogwood (*C. sanguinea*) 'Midwinter Fire' with its bright yellow-orange stems topped with red.

Whatever the selection you choose of the bright-stemmed dogwoods, the color may be more green in summer, turning bright in winter, then back to more green next spring. Color is brightest on year-old stems, so the key to keeping good color is pruning back the oldest stems each spring so new ones will develop that growing season. Shrub dogwoods are hardy, and quite vigorous given full sun (but can tolerate some shade), and can be pruned to within a few inches of the ground to renew overgrown bushes. They are adaptable to many soils, tolerating wet ones and even drought once established. I like to use their stems in holiday arrangements.

The coral bark willow cultivar 'Britzensis' (*Salix alba*) rivals the shrub dogwoods for stem color, its year-old stems being red-orange in winter. It, too, is quite hardy and adaptable as are the shrub dogwoods. Although it can grow into a large tree, cut it back each spring to keep into a shorter mound.

For plants with the added benefit of summer fruit, some of the brambles have stems with color. In my garden, the arching silvery red stems of a 'Bristol' black raspberry contrast nicely with the dark red upright stems of a 'Darrow' blackberry. For a similar stem effect to 'Bristol', consider the Redleaf rose (*Rosa glauca*) with its waxy purple stems.

Green is a color that is lacking in northern winter landscapes, except for evergreen plants, but for a deciduous shrub consider the Japanese kerria (*Kerria japonica*). Hardy to USDA zone 5 (-20 to -10 degrees F) and perhaps a bit colder, this old-fashioned shrub has arching stems and a rounded form. It has bright yellow flowers in spring, yellow fall leaves, and bright green stems (yellow with green stripes on the less common cultivar 'Kin Kan').

In addition to bark color, some woody plants have attractive peeling ("exfoliating") bark. Most familiar of such plants is the River birch (*Betula nigra*) with its tan to pink peeling bark at a young age. The best choice and commonly found cultivar of River birch is 'Heritage'. The Himalayan (*B. utilis* var. *jacquemontii*) and white birches (*B. papyrifera*) have white peeling bark. A good choice for the latter, resistant to the common bronze birch borer, is Prairie Dream.

If you like lilacs, consider the Peking lilac (*Syringa pekinensis*) and its cultivar 'China Snow' with glossy, coppery bark that peels in strips. Flowers are in mid-June, a creamy white more similar to the tree lilac than the common lilac.

For a more unusual large shrub or small tree, look for the Seven Sons flower (*Heptacodium miconioides*). A relatively recent introduction from China, this choice plant can be seen in mass at the Chinese garden at the Montreal Botanical Gardens. The small, fragrant white flowers bloom in September. The bark peels in long, vertical strips to create a tan and brown effect. Seven Sons is hardy into USDA zone 4b (-20 to -25 degrees F).

Bark on some small trees may not peel but is still quite attractive. A couple of my favorites are cherries — the paperbark (*Prunus serrula*) and the Amur chokecherry (*P. maackii*). They are relatively fast growing, with glossy cinnamon bark. The latter is often short-lived due to weak branch structure or girdling roots, but one I had lasted over 20 years. I had it (and now its replacement of the same) planted in our front yard where we can see its beautiful bark, and where the birds can land on their way to our feeders. It has amazed me how many holes in the bark it can withstand due to woodpeckers and sapsuckers!

The European hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*) has gray, muscle-like bark and is hardy to Zone 4. Related to the bright-stemmed dogwoods, but less hardy (zone 5) is the kousa dogwood

(*Cornus kousa*). Its bark is a patchwork of gray, tan, brown, and orange.

Look for these and other shrubs and trees with attractive bark when adding plants to your landscape. They'll provide interest long after flowers and leaves are done with their show.

Allotment Gardens

Dale Odorizzi

Master Gardener of Lanark County

This past winter, after nearly 20 years of living on a 30-acre lot with many gardens and a huge vegetable garden, we decided to sell up and move to a condo. The hardest part about leaving was leaving behind my vegetable garden. In fact, when we received an offer to purchase our property, I put two conditions in the agreement. First was we would not sell until the end of July so I could harvest my garlic. Second, I could return in September and pick my tomatoes. It turns out, we did not need to exercise the second condition because I found a "not too distant" allotment garden.

Allotment gardens are very popular in Britain and have been in existence for hundreds of years, with evidence pointing back to Anglo-Saxon times. In Canada, they are a relatively new idea with the first ones coming to Ottawa in the early 1970s. In fact, in Britain there are many national laws protecting Allotment Garden space. Locally, we are often at risk of being taken over by something else.

When starting out on your allotment adventure, the first thing you need to learn are the operating principles. Are there things you can and cannot do? Can you plant overwintering crops? (garlic for example). Will you have the same plot next year? In our allotment garden, we cannot sell our produce, or use pesticides or herbicides but we can plant garlic or perennial vegetables. We also have access to water but are encouraged to use it sparingly and not to leave water running unattended and to use mulch to prevent evaporation. Finally, we cannot plant trees or shrubs or invasive plants, such as mint. At the end of the season, we must remove everything we have at the garden site, such as tomato cages and stakes, fences and gazebos.

Who gardens at an allotment garden? We have first time gardeners who are living in apart-

ments and want to grow their own food. We have lifelong gardeners who have downsized and miss getting their hands dirty.

While gardening is gardening in an allotment or on your own property, there are also many differences. One of the best things about an allotment is it becomes a much more social activity. Gardening at my house, I worked alone with a little assistance from the frogs and birds and the occasional deer. At the allotment, there are many other gardeners, close by. You can watch vegetables you have never considered growing beside your old favorites. You can learn different techniques. You can also feel a little humbled when you see everyone else's crops growing better than your own.

One concern many people expressed to me was "Aren't you afraid people are going to steal your crops?" While this was a small concern, it turned out to be completely unfounded. I have not had any of my produce pilfered by anyone except a few nibbles from a deer or a rabbit. I have left tools at the plot overnight and again they were there on my next visit.

One negative aspect about gardening away from your home is that you must plan each visit to the allotment. If I forgot something at my house, it was a simple little hike back up the driveway to get a tool or a basket. At the allotment, a forgotten tool might mean a trip back home or a change in what you planned to do. I discovered another problem on my last visit. I filled up my bushel basket with tomatoes. As I started to carry them to my car, I realized how heavy the basket was. Of course, at the house, I had my trusty wheelbarrow to help me haul produce to the house. Here it was only "Dale-power" and seemed a long walk back to the car.

When I lived in the country, I composted just about everything. Leaves were ground up and put in large bins to be used next season or to be used as mulch. The compost pile was beside the garden so it was only a short hop to load the wheelbarrow to haul loads over to the garden. At the allotment, everything must be brought in to add soil amendments.

Nothing beats having a garden right outside your door but when that is not possible an allotment garden is wonderful. If you are itching to get your hands dirty and grow your own food, I strongly encourage you to find an allotment garden near you.