

The laws of probability dictate we should have already experienced it. For those of us living in Central Nebraska, October 2nd, was its first expected arrival date. I usually begin writing about a week before my column actually appears in the Hub. Now that you are reading this particular column, it may have already happened — hopefully not. I'm referring to our first killing frost.



Each new year, when spring arrives, I'm always eager to begin another gardening season. However, by the time October rolls around, my zeal wanes. By that time, routine gardening chores have lost their appeal. I'm ready for a break. The fact remains, before I rest on my laurels, there are things I need to accomplish prior to frost.

Throughout the summer months, we display them all over the yard as well as on our deck. A good share of these plants are annuals. Some are perennials. We also grow temperennials. Although I'm not sure if the term 'temperennial' is an official botanical name, I do know that it applies to plants deemed tender—non-hardy perennials. What is classified as a perennial in USDA Zones 6 and higher would not be a perennial in Nebraska. Our winters are too cold for them to survive.

For years, Rita and I have grown an assortment of potted plants, and

Each time we knowingly purchase a temperennial, we treat it as an annual and let it die with the first frost or carry it indoors for the winter. Being somewhat frugal, over the years we have cared for many temperennials through the winter. Some of the herbaceous temperennials we've wintered over include birds nest fern, bird of paradise, hoyas, Boston fern, split-leaf philodendron, bleeding heart vine and banana plant. Our woody-stemmed temperennials include ficus, oleander, and non-hardy hibiscus. Over the years, many have become quite large. Unfortunately, the larger the plant, the more difficult it becomes to care for indoors. No matter what the size or whether they are annuals, perennials or temperennials, a few precautionary steps need to be completed before moving plants indoors for the winter.

First, give the potted plants a good cleaning by removing dead or damaged branches and leaves. Follow that with a garden hose shower. Not only does it clean the dust and debris from the plant, but it is a great way to dislodge the first round of insect pests that might be present. If plants have gotten leggy during their outdoor stay, remove from the container and prune the top and roots in equal proportions.

I can assure you, if insect problems existed on the plants outdoors, carrying them indoors without treating will exacerbate the problem. For plants in small containers, gently slip the plant from the pot and examine the soil. Typically slugs, sowbugs and ants will be visible on the outer layer of soil near the drainage holes. Flick them off with a finger or stick. I further recommend treating the soil with a granular systemic insecticide and watering in well.

Try to acclimate the plants. Sudden changes in temperature, light and humidity can be traumatic to plants. Such changes can result in yellowed leaves, dieback, wilting and sometimes death.

Attempt to move plants indoors before nighttime temperatures dip below 45 ° F. Most tropical plants will suffer damage at temperatures below 40 ° F — a few even below 50 °F. To prevent additional shock, try to expose plants gradually to reduced lighting before transporting indoors. When moved indoors, it's best to place them in a southern window exposure or under plant lights on a timer for 16 hours a day. In any case, expect some leaves to fall. New leaves should form as the plants readapt to the lower light.

Once indoors, avoid overwatering. Allow the soil surface to dry before watering again. Keep in mind, the underlying goal of carrying plants indoors for the winter is simply to keep them alive. Don't expect them to thrive or perform as well as they did outdoors.

With a little maintenance and a dash of good luck, temperennials can survive the winter indoors. Once spring returns, they can take their place outdoors as soon as the threat of frost is gone — approximately May 01.