

Ongoing, freezing temperatures are fast approaching. The question on one's mind might be, "Should I save them or let them die?" I am referring to certain flowering plants called tenders — those not designed to survive Nebraska's winters and particularly those tenders that grow from a bulb, a rhizome, a tuber, or a corm. For this article, I will simplify by categorizing all as being grown from a bulb.

Although USDA Zone 5 is suitable for growing many wonderful perennials, I find it exciting to incorporate these tender plants into our landscape. They create an exotic, tropical look that most regular Zone 5 perennials cannot provide. These tender, bulb-producing plants include canna, caladium, gladiola, dahlia, elephant ear, calla lily, and tuberous begonia.

With the month of October quickly vanishing, most of these tropical tenders are now looking a bit rag-tag. Even if frost has not occurred, they have lost most of their glamour. Their foliage cannot tolerate prolonged exposures below 50°F. If frost has already occurred, the foliage of these plants will now likely appear dead, but there is good news! The bulbs remain viable. The warmer soil temperature is protecting the bulbs —but not for long.

Although they would surely die if left outdoors through the freezing winter month, now is the time to save them by digging the plant, cutting away the foliage and storing the bulbs.

This is what I recommend. Carefully dig and lift the entire plants in preparation for bulb storage. Avoid any damage to bulbs while digging. Once lifted, shake off the excess dirt and cut away the foliage an inch or two above the bulbs.

Curing the bulbs is next. Place the bulbs in a single layer in an area that is well ventilated and away from direct sunlight. The optimal temperature for curing is between 60° and 70°F degree F. Avoid exposing the bulbs to freezing temperatures. Most of these bulbs will take at least three days and maybe a week before they are cured and ready for storage.

Before storing for the winter, once again, carefully inspect the bulbs for damage. Destroy all damaged bulbs. Most bulbs store best in a dry, dark, well-

ventilated place with temperatures of 40°F to 50°F. Use shallow cardboard boxes, paper bags or mesh bags to store bulbs. Avoid plastic bags. Plastic bags do not breathe, and they trap moisture — both conditions promote disease. Keep bulbs from touching one another and avoid stacking. To minimize fungal diseases during storage, dust the bulbs lightly with sulfur dust.

While storing, bulbs must remain dry. Packing them in vermiculite or sawdust will assure this requirement. Once in storage, check the bulbs periodically for insect, disease or rot. As the old saying goes, “One bad apple can spoil the whole barrel.” The same applies to bulbs. If any bulb has rotted, discard and destroy it.

Lastly, plan to create some kind of identification for the stored bulbs; otherwise, it may be difficult to identify them in the spring. Plastic tags or taped labels on the containers marked with a permanent marker will help the identification process.

November draws near and with it freezing temperatures. There is no sense in letting them die. Now is the perfect time to lift and save the bulbs from tender flowering plants.