Small-Space Winter Garden Checklist

Pots, leaves and stems - three places to make a deliberate winter plan.

Use the pot checks for ordinary draining containers and the habitat checks for in-ground perennial beds. Pots are not a substitute for insulated garden soil or equivalent overwintering habitat. Adapt the plan to your plant, climate and site.

01 Make a winter plan for each pot

- ☐ Identify the plant and its cold hardiness. Separate hardy perennials from tender plants that need a different winter plan. [1]
- ☐ Choose a species-appropriate winter location. A plant hardy in the ground is not automatically hardy in an exposed pot. [1]
- ☐ Check the growing pot's drainage outlets and empty collected saucer or outer-pot water. Follow the maker's winter instructions for self-watering systems.
- ☐ Plan moisture checks through winter. For dormant plants in cold storage, monitor the mix and water only as needed; avoid overwatering or watering frozen soil. [2]

02 Choose a habitat zone in an in-ground bed

- ☐ Select healthy leaves and standing perennial stems to retain where they do not obstruct access. Keep retained leaves intact for habitat. [3,4]
- ☐ Move excess leaves off paths and thickly covered lawn. Do not smother perennial crowns with a deep layer. [3]
- ☐ Separate material with known disease or serious pest problems. Use local disposal guidance; ordinary home compost may not destroy the problem. [3]

03 Keep a clear zone and a spring plan

- ☐ Keep routes, steps and drains usable. Check lease, HOA and local requirements before moving pots or retaining dry material.
- ☐ Where wildfire exposure applies, follow local fire guidance first. USFA advises keeping the first 5 feet around homes free of flammables. [6]
- ☐ Record what you retained and why. Reassess in spring using local conditions and insect activity; one warm day is not a universal cleanup signal. [5]

Plant- and climate-specific advice comes first. Do not use leaf piles on pots as a shortcut to winter protection. Use page 2 to record decisions.

Record it. Check it. Adjust it.

Location / climate: _____ Date: _____

A Pot-by-pot plan

Confirm a suitable winter method for the species. Record the source or advice you used.

Plant / pot: _____

Winter location + method: _____

Guidance checked / hardiness notes: _____

Moisture check / next action: _____

Plant / pot: _____

Winter location + method: _____

Guidance checked / hardiness notes: _____

Moisture check / next action: _____

B Habitat and clear zones

In-ground habitat area to retain: _____

Healthy leaves / standing stems to leave: _____

Clear zone / known plant-health issue to address: _____

Local fire, property or disposal guidance checked: _____

C Recheck notes

Date / weather change: _____

Observation / action / next check: _____

Sources and full guidance

Use the numbered sources on the web version for details. No organization below endorses this worksheet.

1. Illinois Extension: Overwintering potted plants
2. Iowa State Extension: Overwintering unplanted trees, shrubs and perennials
3. Iowa State Extension: Managing fallen leaves and fall cleanup
4. Xerces Society: Leave the Leaves
5. Xerces Society: Spring cleanup timing
6. U.S. Fire Administration: Before a WUI Fire

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