

Hooray, It's "Bedtime!"
By J. R. Natter

Hooray! It's time to put the fuchsias to bed. No more watering, fertilizing, pinching, and pruning. Just peace and quiet while dreamily searching the catalogues for new varieties for the spring garden. Wait a minute! Those of you in the mild winter areas better not get too excited. Your job is not yet done. Hang those fuchsias back on the hook and tend to their needs for a while. You still have considerable time to enjoy your favorite flowering plant, the fuchsias. But, for the rest of you—whose who live in areas where the weather is becoming more and more brisk and where threats of frost will soon be broadcast by the weatherman—you had better get thinking about what-happens-next in the lives of your fuchsias. Your upcoming tasks, and how difficult or complicated they may or may not be, depends on several basic factors. First, is the fuchsia growing in the ground or in a container? Second, how cold does it get in your area?

General Guidelines

Actually, anyone who has lived and gardened in a cold climate probably already knows how to treat tender plants during the winter. Fuchsia winter care is not different that the care required for the other semi-tender plants. Either taken them in, protect them outdoors, or throw them out and start over for the next season. The temperature range you are dealing with will be one of the most important items to consider. The guiding principle for container-grown fuchsias may be as simple to "move it or lose it." Whereas the principle behind successful winter care of ground-grown varieties will most likely be "protect it on site." Many fuchsias can tolerate temperatures to 26° (whether they are container or ground grown.) However, if you have any of the orange-flowered varieties or some of the triphylla hybrids, you had better get hopping and do something fast—before the frost hits your area. These varieties are probably the most tender of all fuchsia. They will require protection if they are to survive and grow another season. If in doubt as to the hardiness of your fuchsias, play it safe and apply a wintertime blanket to keep your fuchsias protected and cozy during the cold periods ahead.

Container-grown Fuchsias

Multiple methods exist to protect your container-grown fuchsias from the cold. But you must first determine how cold the weather might be before you can decide just how vigorous your protection will need to be. Let's take a look at some of the methods available to you.

Moderately cold Areas

In slightly colder areas, gather the containers together and place the pots side-by-side. The grouping of the containers will provide a "pot community" with each one helping to keep the other warm. A further refinement of the group method would be to cover the pots and fill the cracks between them with a mulch. The mulching material could be a number of different things, including that easily available substance, fallen autumn leaves. Some growers will go so far as to dig a trench in a well-drained site, add crocking material at the base, and fill the trench with the trimmed-back, dormant fuchsias. Then, all is covered with a protective mulch. If you use this method, be certain to remember to use chicken wire or something similar to serve as the last layer. You don't want a winter wind to efficiently undo all that you did. If you do not want to store the plants outdoors, other places can be suitable substitutes. How about a sunporch, basement, or garage? These sites

can serve as cool-storage areas if the temperatures will be above freezing during the winter months. Once again, lightly trim the plants back (at least by 2/3) as a space-saver.

Other Alternative

If your space is cramped, you may want to seriously consider another option. As long as you have easy access to replacements for your fuchsias in spring (either from a nursery or catalog), and if your budget can stand it, then do not hesitate to act as if you were a hard-hearted Hannah. Throw the fuchsia out into the trash or compost.

In other words, even though fuchsias are perennials, there is no requirement that you keep the plant from one year to the next. It may be a whole lot easier to simply replace it next season. If you do not have accessible replacements, you might want to take fresh tip cuttings first. Then you can throw the old plant out. What's that? You're wondering what in the world you are going to do with the cuttings?

Recruits for Next Year

You're on the way to growing your own replacements for next year if you have one of the following: A nice, bright window; a sunporch (minimum temperature of 40° F); a fluorescent light set-up. Put your cutting in your favorite rooting medium. Use rooting hormone if you feel it would help, although it is not necessary if the cutting is of good fresh, crisp softwood. Set the newly potted cutting in a bright place and keep the medium slightly moist. Now, sit back and relax while Mother Nature is busy helping your cuttings develop a good root system. You will be able to pot the cuttings into four-inch pots sometime after four weeks. The actual time will depend on the prevailing room temperature—the lower the temperature, the longer the rooting process will take.

Make the Days Brighter

You might be interested in using fluorescent lights for rooting the cuttings and growing the young plants. Suspend a light fixture about 10 to 12 inches above the cuttings. The most efficient system used an eight-foot fixture with two 40-watt Cool White fluorescent tubes. However, I have had a great deal of success with a four-foot fixture and two tubes. Once the cutting is well-rooted, move it on to a four-inch pot. Move the lights closer to the plants—about four to six inches away from the top of the leaves. Your fuchsia will get leggy and lax if the lights are too far away at this stage. Set a timer (yourself or an electric one) to keep the lights on for 10 hours a day while the cuttings are rooting. After potting into the four-inch and moving the plants closer to the lights, extend the daylength to 12 to 14 hours. Start fertilizing lightly to encourage steady growth (Don't be too heavy-handed with the fertilizer or you will soon find that your fuchsias have outgrown the available area.)

Ground-grown Fuchsias

The keys to success for winter care in the colder areas will be the varieties you have chosen to grow and whether or not you have provided the fuchsias with a sufficient foot-warming device. Ground-grown fuchsia, especially if they have at least a six-inch mulch at the base, can survive quite a bit of cold. Your fuchsia may freeze to the ground, but don't give up hope until you give it a chance to re-sprout from the roots during the warm spring days. If you have any doubts about the success of the mulch you use for your ground-grown fuchsia, provide some insurance: take some cuttings before the weather gets too cold. Treat your cuttings in one of the methods outlined previously and you, too, will have new recruits for next season.

A Few Last Words

Be an informed and wise grower. Take time to sit down and analyze your own situation. Include considerations of the prevailing temperature, your fuchsias, and your available time and energy. Fit your winter care methods to your lifestyle, your climatic region, and the needs of your plants. Cold weather care of fuchsias can be easy if you apply the proper methods in the proper places.

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