

In the Garden with Shobha Vanchiswar



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If you are like me, then during the long, dark winter months you crave the pleasures of a garden. Don't get me wrong, I like the physical respite, but I do miss the sights and smells of the garden.

To counteract these blues, I bring in some greens. I force bulbs and have them in bloom in almost every room in the house. Just the sight of emerging shoots is heartwarming.

Suffuse the house with fragrance

When the jasmines and Brugmansias begin to flower, I bring them in from the greenhouse. It is astounding how just a single plant can suffuse the entire house with heavenly fragrance. Sometimes all it takes is a single flower in bloom. As the fragrance is strongest at night, they quite literally provide sweet dreams! Bear in mind that all parts of a Brugmansia are poisonous — so keep them away from little children and pets.

Most gardeners do not have greenhouses. However, if a nice sunny room is available, I suggest purchasing one or both of these plants. They do not require a lot of maintenance. In the warm months, bring them outdoors and treat as you would any other plant. Provide sun, water and an occasional dose of organic fertilizer.



With bulbs and other plants providing cheer through the winter months, the cold is made more bearable. This preview of spring keeps us gardeners going until it finally arrives.

Responses from the Gardener:

What to do with your plants when you're away for a week or two

In summer, this is simple. Just set the pots outside in an area that is partly shady. They should be able to get the rain or water from sprinklers. Under a tree that isn't too dense works best.

In winter, this is can be a problem. First thing, when potting up a plant, incorporate water retaining crystals. These crystals turn gelatinous as they fill up with water. As the soil dries, they release water back into it, so you don't have to water them as often. I fill a pot one-third with soil and add the crystals, then add more soil and pot up the plant.

Many methods to try

Various methods are advised when plants are left untended while a homeowner is away. Placing plants in a bathtub filled with three to five inches of water is one approach. The plants take in water from below. This is okay if the pots are not too big, but hardly practical for big pots. Personally, I am not comfortable with pots sitting in water over an extended length of time.



Another method is to set the pots on trays filled with water and stones. Again, the water is taken in from below. Because of the gravel, the pots are not quite sitting in water. This can work for any size pot.

A tried and true method is to soak pots completely in water and then place them in large, clear plastic bags. This creates a terrarium of sorts, where the water gets recycled over and over. This keeps even big pots moist for a week or more. Speaking of recycling, the clear bags from the dry-cleaners work well in this situation.

In garden centers there are many devices available for delivering water over a period of time. Most of these work but if you have many plants, this can be rather complicated.

Keep it cool for your plants

I also turn the thermostat down to between 58 and 60 degrees. This way I know it will not get too warm for the plants. I also keep a big humidifier going.

In the end, what truly keeps the plants healthy and gives me peace of mind is to have a reliable friend check in periodically. Make sure it is someone who

knows a thing or two about plants. One year while we were gone, the furnace shut itself off. All the plants would have died if my very responsible friend hadn't been keeping an eye on things. Another time, our trip unexpectedly lengthened and the same friend kept my plants watered.

I know I haven't provided a simple solution but, in all honesty, I don't think there is one.

Inquiries to the Gardener:

How to care for plants brought in from outdoors

First and foremost, the pots and plants need to be washed thoroughly before being brought inside. They must be examined for any infestation or infection. Check for spider mites, aphids, etc. Treat the problem organically and right away. You want to bring inside healthy, clean plants. One sick plant can quickly infect all the others, just like the common cold.

If a plant looks root bound or too big for its current pot, then now is the time to repot. If repotting, add some water-retaining crystals in the bottom third of the pot (available in gardening stores). This will help reduce the frequency of watering the plant. Of course, you don't have to do this for your cactii.

Cutting back plants—hurts the gardener, helps the plant

Cut back the plant. I know this is hard to do when the plant looks lush and full, but since it will be subjected to a change of scene, the trim will be for its own good. If the plant is in full bloom, cut it back after blooming is completed.

Once the plant is inside, set it in a well lit, sunny and ventilated area. Keep it away from direct heat and water regularly, but only when the soil feels dry. Stick your finger a good inch into the soil, and if it comes out soil free then the soil is dry. Moist soil will cling to the finger. Some plants will need water more frequently than others, so stay vigilant.

A humidifier helps both plants and people

In winter, the air in most homes is too dry. A good humidifier will benefit humans and plants.

Rotate the pots often so all sides get equal exposure. Growth will be uniform. I fertilize lightly once a month. Any general, organic fertilizer will do, unless your plant has specific needs. Stay aware of any changes and treat problems right away.

Although a plant often enters the house looking as radiant as a new bride, it

may cease to do so over time. This can be due to several reasons. If it is a true annual, then it has simply run its course and needs to be tossed. Others might go through a phase of adjustment and then perk up. Plants go through their natural cycles. In winter, many shed their leaves and go dormant. Keep watering them. In spring they will grow back.

All this sounds like a lot but it isn't. It's rather simple and straight forward really. Just get into a routine and before you know it, you will be hauling healthy, well-tended plants back outside come spring.

Shobha Vanchiswar has been gardening all her life, the last 19 years in Chappaqua. She received the Golden Trowel Award for garden design in 2007 from Garden Design magazine. She has a garden design business, Seeds of Design.

