



## Winter Fuchsia Care

by Verna Berger

Autumn is here and with it comes cooling temperatures and a slow diminishing of the lush plants we have so enjoyed over the summer. Let me preface the following information by saying there are many ways to winter over your fuchsias. This article will only deal with those we have had experience with and what has worked for us at our location in the Pacific Northwest. If you have been using other methods which have proved successful, please don't feel the need to change unless you want to try something different or easier.

Fuchsias need a time to prepare themselves for winter. You may be familiar with the term "a hardening off period". That is a term used for the period of time plants need to acclimate themselves to the impending colder months ahead. That period is beginning now. All fertilization and any activity promoting growth should be terminated. From mid-August to mid-September you may wish to alter your fertilizer to one low in nitrogen and high in potassium and phosphorous as these are the elements that will help prepare your plants for the colder time ahead. However, come mid-September, stop all fertilization.

All potting up or transplanting should be terminated as that activity promotes root growth. You may continue to remove spent blossoms, but allow the seed pods (berries) to remain on the plant to ripen. This will send a message to your plants that it is time to cease blossom production.

Decrease your watering schedule, but do not

discontinue watering altogether. Fuchsia roots must not dry out. Dry roots equal a dead fuchsia.

The further into Autumn we get, the more you will notice your fuchsias becoming ratty looking, their leaves will begin to turn yellow and drop from the branches. This is not a pretty sight, and you may tend to think something is wrong, but don't worry about how they look. That is normal for this time of year.

Try to keep all falling debris cleaned up in your container fuchsias. This insures less room for insects to find their way in to hide, lay eggs, and lay waiting in your soil for Spring, (providing we have a mild winter) when they will awaken to find you fit right at the beginning of your growing season.

Allow your plants to go through a couple light frosts. This is necessary for a couple reasons. One, it helps to complete defoliation, and two, it drives the sap back from the tips of the plant. This is important, because some plants may need to be pruned in order to fit into the storage area. If there is sap in the tips, pruning could result in bleeding and die back.

Now, as usual, there is an exception to what has just been said. There are some Species, Fuchsias and Triphylla Hybrids that are generally not considered hardy, and do not like temperature lower than 45 degrees. If you do not want to chance losing them, transfer them to a more sheltered area when night time temperatures of less than 45 degrees are predicted. If you, as we do, have these non-hardy varieties planted in your



garden bed, dig them up, plant in a container large enough to comfortably hold the root ball, and bring them inside a storage area that will meet the temperature requirements until Spring.

There is some controversy on this next point. I will present both sides and you decide. It has worked for us, however. During the Summer months, there are little insects that just love to invade your potted plants, laying eggs in the soil. To protect your plants from the resulting damage they will do as their cycle continues, you may wish to use a soil drench prior to putting your plants into storage. 1/4 cup of chlorine bleach to 5 gallon water will do the trick. Remove any remaining leaves and debris in the containers, where fungus or disease could form, be sure the soil in the pot is MOIST and apply the drench, allowing it to run completely through. Applying this drench to a dry plant will result in damage. Our wheelbarrow changes it's main purpose at this time, and serves as our drenching equipment. By catching all the mixture that runs through, it goes a little further.

Now, for the opposing view. Some growers feel this solution could damage the root system. All I can say is, we have tried both using the drench and not using it, and even though it is a lot of work, we feel more satisfied using it.

**VERY IMPORTANT-** Prune only what is necessary to fit the plant into it's storage area. You may have to prune severely. If you do, bleeding may occur, so give the plants sufficient drying time prior to placing them into storage. A little dab of 3% Hydrogen Peroxide on the cut will help heal and prevent any fungus or bacteria settling in at the pruning point. Using a Q-tip makes this task easy.



Fuchsias need about 12 weeks of dormancy. Actually while the top portion of the plant goes dormant, the roots do not go completely dormant. Here in the Pacific Northwest, they can usually be left outside until mid to late November. We also usually have sufficient rainfall to keep them moist. However, if they are in a protected area or rainfall is below normal, be sure to check them regularly. Again, fuchsias **MUST NOT DRY** out. I cannot emphasize this enough. More fuchsias are lost during winter storage due to lack of water than from freezing. A dry fuchsia is a dead fuchsia.

One cup of water per month should be sufficient. However, check often because varying sizes of containers could require a different schedule. For instance, plants in small 4" pots are going to dry out quicker than those in gallon size containers. Think you might have trouble remembering to water once a month? How about planning to water on the holiday schedule: Thanksgiving, Christmas, Martin Luther King's Birthday and Valentine's Day.



By St. Patrick's day in March you should be able to begin bringing them outside part time and beginning the Spring routine of care.

Now, let's talk about some of the storage areas people have used. This article will by no means mention them all, but you will get the idea. Be inventive.

Here in the Pacific Northwest, we can have some fairly mild winters, therefore, if you don't have too many plants, you may be able to get by with just placing your fuchsias under a porch or on a patio/deck close to the wall. Even under a picnic table will work. Have a tarp or something to cover them with if the temperatures dip low. For a prolonged cold spell, you will have to bring them inside until the threat of freezing temperatures is over.

A large box, chest or even a large plastic bag, well insulated with shredded paper, vermiculite, barkdust, peat moss, dry leaves, etc., will work. Do not use Oak leaves. There should be 6-8 inches of insulation between the plants and all outside walls of the chosen container.

Garage, Basement, Shed or Window Well are also appropriate storage areas. There are other things to consider with these areas, however. They are usually well above freezing. Therefore fuchsias will be somewhat active, especially if the temperatures are above 40 degrees. This requires a good amount of light and air circulation, and may require water more often than once a month. Misting the branches periodically also provides a little humidity, which fuchsias also like.

If temperatures are consistently between 50-60 degrees, you may want to consider adding some artificial light. The reason being, those plants exposed to warmer temperatures and insufficient

light will produce pale, spindly, weak growth unable to support the resultant leaves and blossoms.

A Garage or Shed may not have windows and may be in the 35-40 degrees range. Your plants will be dormant at that point, but will still need moisture occasionally and good air circulation.

If you have many plants, you may want to build a Cold Frame in which to store your fuchsias. We have directions for a very simple one, which, if you are interested, you may e-mail us at: [swfuchsia@pcez.com](mailto:swfuchsia@pcez.com) and we will be happy to forward this to you. With a cold frame, as with a greenhouse, cleanliness is of the utmost importance as well as air circulation. Prior to placing any plants in either of these structures, scrub all inside areas with a Lysol, Bleach or Soap solution to get rid of any bacteria or insects which may have laid eggs inside.

An exception to the previous instruction regarding pruning also applies here. You will probably need to do most of your pruning at this time, rather than Spring, to fit as many plants as possible into the structure. This will also provide more circulation, which, as stated, is very important.

A very good investment is a Moisture Meter. These are available at most Nurseries, are reasonable, and could save you the loss of your plants. Sometimes a plant may look dry on the top, but is not dry at the roots. During the winter months, the roots are what we are concerned about. Of course, you can always stick your finger down around the roots to check, but often we come to a different conclusion than the Moisture Meter. We humans may have a hard time reading the mind of the fuchsia root. This little instrument could make the difference between a live or dead plant come Spring.



Once the plants begin to show signs of new growth, it is time to complete the pruning process, provided this was not done in the autumn, and move them to a sheltered area to begin their new growing season. Prune to the point where you see new growth. The timing for this is always variable, but usually around mid-March we can expect to see temperatures consistently above 40 degrees. If you have removed them to a sheltered area and see below 40 degrees temperatures predicted, cover them with a tarp or something similar until things warm up.

Hardy Fuchsias in the ground require very little preparation for winter. In the Pacific Northwest, most hardy upright fuchsias will survive the conditions with a minimum of care. Approximately mid-October, prune back the tall branches to protect them from being whipped by the wind, then

complete pruning in the Spring. If you prefer to cut them all the way back in the Fall, that is okay too. We have done it both ways. The main reason we like to prune down to just above the first two nodes above the ground, is because it is easier to get the mulch more evenly distributed over the top of the plant. Once the pruning is completed, cover each plant with a 6"-8" mound of mulch, compost, peat moss, leaves, etc. Caution - do not use Oak leaves. Completely cover the plants inside the drip line.

In the Spring, when all danger of frost is past, complete your pruning process if not done in the Autumn. Uncover the plant and prune back to live wood.

Do not be alarmed if all the branches appear to be dead. They may very well be dead. However, it is just as likely the branches are dead but not the root. Scrape a little bark off the woody area just below the surface of the soil. If there is green inside, the plant is alive and new growth will more than likely emerge from the root. This will take a little longer, but by summer you will have a nice looking plant.

Do not be discouraged if you lose a couple plants. We all do. Sometimes there are no explanations, it just happens. At least you will know you have done your best to bring them into another growing season. Waking your fuchsias is somewhat similar to waking your children. Some are early birds, others sleepyheads. With those that seem eager to burst into spring, exercise caution, as there can be many a cold night yet to come.