

Overwintering Tropical Plants

Tropical plants add a special look to our indoor and outdoor living spaces. Homeowners often use large plants, such as banana, caladium, elephant ear, Chinese hibiscus, Mandevilla, palm, and ficus, to provide a unique tropical appearance. These plants are readily available and do very well outdoors from late spring through fall. However, by the end of the season some, especially the banana, may be too large to overwinter indoors. Bananas will grow from a two-foot plant to ten feet or more in just one summer. Unless you have a place large enough for them, like a room with a vaulted ceiling, you may have to leave such jumbo-sized plants outside to die. You can prune the other large plants to a more manageable size before bringing them indoors.

In late summer, start planning to bring your plants indoors at the proper time. Don't wait until the last minute. Night temperatures that regularly drop below 50°F will cause tropical plants to turn yellow and drop leaves. Before you bring the plants indoors, inspect them closely for insect and mite pests and treat accordingly. Even a mild infestation of insects such as scale, mealybug, or aphids will explode into a serious problem because the insect predators that fed on them outdoors are not indoors to control them. Once you've pruned large plants to an acceptable size, a gentle bath with a mild insecticidal soap will help keep the pest population under control.

The plants will experience a period of adjustment when you bring them indoors. They were accustomed to ideal conditions and must suddenly adapt to much lower light and low humidity. This adjustment period will last several weeks. The change in light may cause yellowing and dropping of older leaves, sometimes severe, on most plants. Supplemental lighting with cool white florescent lights can improve survival. Don't expect the plants to grow much, if at all, during the winter months because the light conditions are simply too low. When plants receive reduced light, their need for water also declines. It is very

important not to overwater them, especially during the initial adjustment period. Water only when the soil is dry. Remember, the larger the pot, the longer it takes for the soil to dry.

Specific plant needs

Banana plants, *Musa spp.*



Red banana plants are the variety most frequently grown by home gardeners. They have deep red markings on the leaves and do not grow as large as most other bananas. Unlike larger banana varieties, they can be brought indoors. They will probably decline, but will survive until next spring. Keep red banana plants in a very bright window and water thoroughly whenever the soil dries completely. The older leaves will die and need to be trimmed. Spider mites are often a serious problem when red banana plants are indoors. Inspect the underside of the leaves frequently. At the first sign of mite webbing, spray with a labeled houseplant product. When preparing to move red banana trees back outside, you can stimulate growth by cutting off the top two or three inches of the stem on mature, older plants.

Caladiums and elephant ears, *Colocasia spp.*



Caladiums are colorful natives of South America that are favorites for use in shady places in the landscape. Elephant ears are related to caladiums, but they are a solid green and grow as large as four feet. Elephant ear leaves can be three feet long and very broad. Neither caladiums nor elephant ears survive well indoors over the winter because they need to go through a rest period. After frost kills the plants, bring the tubers indoors for overwinter storing. Clean off the soil but do not wash them, because that can cause them to rot. Store them in a cool place, and then pot them in late February. Place the pots in a warm, bright location. Water them as needed to promote new growth, and plant them outdoors after May 10.

Chinese hibiscuses, *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*

Chinese hibiscuses will overwinter well indoors, but they need a very bright place. During the adjustment period, they will drop some leaves and stop growing, but then they will settle in nicely and flower over the winter. Large plants can be trimmed back, which will help them grow fuller. Indoor hibiscuses are prone to spider mites and scale insects, so monitor them regularly. Spray with a labeled houseplant insecticide as needed.

Ficus trees, *Ficus spp.*

Ficus is the genus of all the different types of rubber trees popularly known as “fig trees.” Three well-known members of the ficus group are the rubber plant (*F. elastica*), the weeping fig (*F. benjamina*), and the fiddle-leaf fig (*F. lyrata*). The most commonly-grown type is the weeping fig. These trees can reach 20 feet or more outdoors in the tropics. Indoors, they are typically floor plants and are maintained at a desired height by pruning. Too many cold nights below 55°F cause ficus trees to start dropping leaves. Once indoors they may continue to lose



some leaves if the light intensity is too low. Always place them in a bright sunny window, especially for the first few weeks. During this period of adjustment keep them a little drier than normal. Weeping figs will eventually produce new leaves that are better adjusted to indoor light intensities. However rubber trees and fiddle-leaf figs will not replace leaves that are lost indoors, even when moved back outdoors. When moved back outdoors, new branches usually grow and over time the plant regains its attractiveness. Sometimes rubber plants and fiddle leaf figs are infested with scale insects. Be sure to control them with a labeled house plant insecticide and monitor them frequently. Scale insect will quickly destroy these plants indoors.

Mandevilla vines, *Mandevilla spp.*



This is a very beautiful, popular tropical vine that is usually grown as an annual. With a little care, some gardeners successfully overwinter a Mandevilla in a pot. Simply cut the vine back to a manageable size. If it has to be dug and potted, you may need to prune the vine back a little more to compensate for any root loss. Check the plant thoroughly for insects before bringing it indoors, as Mandevillas are susceptible to mealybugs and spider mites. Place it in a bright, sunny location such as near a slider door, and supplement with an artificial light such as cool white florescent tubes, if possible. Monitor it often for insect pests and treat with a labeled houseplant insecticide as need.

Palms, *Livistona chinensis*



Various species of palms are used outdoors during the summer. The most commonly-sold palms are parlor palms, which have arching leaves that are about two feet long. Fortunately, all palms adapt quite well to moving back indoors as long as they are not overwatered. Bring them indoors and place in a bright, sunny window. Older leaves may die until they adjust to the change. Indoors, palms are quite susceptible to spider-mite damage. Check for mites in places where mite populations develop -- on

the underside of the leaves and where the leaves attach to the main stem. Use a labeled houseplant miticide before the problem becomes severe. Palm leaves also collect a lot of household dust. This reduces the amount of light received, resulting in leaf yellowing. Clean them with a damp cloth as needed during the winter.

Schefflera, *Schefflera actinophylla*



Scheffleras or umbrella trees are very popular, attractive plants used in office buildings, indoor shopping malls, and homes. Outdoors in the tropics they grow almost 40 feet tall. Indoors, their sizes range from 6 to 15 feet. When placed outdoors during the summer they will thrive, but often have trouble adjusting to moving back indoors for the winter. The sudden change to lower light intensity will result in Scheffleras losing many lower leaves. Place them in bright indoor light and keep them on the dry side. Spider mites can overtake the plants during winter because scheffleras do not tolerate mites very well and will quickly fall apart under heavy infestations. Carefully inspect for mites before bringing the plants indoors and treat as need with a labeled miticide.

Do you have a plant or insect pest question?

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