

PREPARING HERBS FOR WINTER

Every gardener can enjoy fresh herbs throughout the winter but needs to provide vital shelter for the more tender ones.

Preparation and planning for saving your herbs in winter starts in October. No plant enjoys the cold, searing winds, lying snow or the all too frequent freeze-thaw of a Scots winter and this is especially true of our more delicate Mediterranean herbs.

Our Mediterranean forebears, the Romans, devised protective methods for much more exotic tender specimens than herbs. In the 1st Century, Martial in his 'Epigrams' complains that his patron provides better shelter for his Sicilian fruit tree than Martial himself enjoys. He would, as a guest of the tree, indulge in the pleasure of a whole window, fitted with glass, instead of a tiny room with a window that he couldn't shut. This protection of tender specimens, like oranges here, gradually led to the development of greenhouses, which we can now use for our more humble herbs.

Lemon Verbena, (*Aloysia triphylla*), is particularly tender and if you're not treating it as an annual, you need to take its pot into a frost-free greenhouse. Its stems should first be cut right back to 10-20cm. Like a pelargonium, it should be kept dry, but not desiccated over the winter. In much the same way, French Tarragon is best grown in a large pot and given greenhouse protection. Treated this way, it will produce usable leaves and shoots in early spring.

The larger Bay, (*Laurus nobilis*), appreciates some winter protection too. I have to confess to baulking at the prospect of moving an awesomely vast pot and reckoned that the shelter of the patio and a mild winter would make the back-breaking task unnecessary. Then there was the winter of 2011..... Yet, surprisingly, the tree did survive, even if it looked pretty dreadful all spring, but with an even bigger pot and fresh supply of compost it started to look quite presentable. When you do move a bay tree into shelter, you also get the extra bonus of picking leaves all winter. Needless to say, exotics like Lemon Grass (*Cymbopogon citratus*) or Vietnamese coriander (*Persicaria odorata*) need all the cosseting you can provide and they require either a heated greenhouse or window sill.

What's really useful about having hardier herbs like parsley, chives and mint in the greenhouse, though, is that we can keep on using them for much of the winter, and you don't need to end up with the inevitable icy hands you get after picking Brussels Sprouts. Parsley and chives can be grown in pots throughout the year, making it easy to move them into the greenhouse in the autumn. All you need to do is tidy them up, give them a feed and enjoy. Mint does not thrive in a pot, however large, so dig up some root and put it in a large pot. It will reward this effort by producing fresh, fragrant shoots much earlier in the spring than the part of the plant left outdoors.

Some herbs, like Thyme and Sage, will usually survive outdoors, especially when grown in a sheltered spot. But Rosemary suffers broken branches after a heavy fall of snow as well as dropping most of its needle like leaves when frozen. So the pot-grown Rosemaries have to go into the greenhouse.

If you don't have a greenhouse, don't despair. Endless designs and techniques have been used over the centuries, including the Roman method of putting a deep pile of fresh dung into a pit and placing the potted plant on top of this hot muck. An alternative they had was to put a plant in a very large basket with handles, so well muscled gardeners could move it in and out of shelter. In 'A History of Gardening' [1978], Anthony Huxley describes a development of this

idea, when the pot was placed on a trolley to be moved around at will. This peripatetic pot apparently provided the emperor Tiberius with the daily supply of cucumbers his doctor had prescribed.

We can, of course, take up this idea: a trolley or sack barrow helps us move big pots into shelter, but you'll find that other products are available from garden centres and mail order firms. One company, for example, offers Jute Frost Protection Jackets, made from biodegradable materials. Velcro fastenings and a draw string attach the jacket to the pot. This provides the protection that's essential in the patio for the roots of potted herbs.

With decent protection, many plants can also be left in the ground over winter, even if, again, harvesting may not be an option: you're keeping them alive, not encouraging them to grow the succulent leaves and stems you want for the kitchen. Fleece and environmesh are easy to use when mounted on a frame. A standard cloche would work for low growing plants, but with larger ones, you would need to make or buy a frame that's big enough for the material to be draped over and not touch any leaves. An alternative is to make a wigwam with branches, gorse, straw or bubblefilm, but remember to remove the wigwam during a warmer spell to let in some light and prevent the build up of humidity that could encourage plants to rot.

Given warmth and light, herbs will serve the cook for much of the winter, and shelter from the worst of the elements should at least guarantee their survival.