

Storing Tender Bulbs

Fall is here and with cooler weather, many of us are facing the task of lifting and storing tender bulbs, rhizomes, tubers and corms that will not survive if left in the ground during the winter. They include dahlias, calla lilies, canna lilies, gladiolus, caladiums, tuberous begonias, and oxalis among others. For each of these plants, there is a time to lift them from the ground and a special method to store them for the winter. While we have at least 30 days to begin this process, it's probably a good time to be making a list of what needs to be done, obtain the necessary supplies and develop a plan so that when the time is right, the chore will be a pretty straight forward one. Timing depends upon the first frost which generally occurs around October 10th. That date can vary by two to three weeks and could come earlier rather than later.

Generally speaking, you should wait until 2-3 days after the first frost to dig any bulbous rootstock from the ground. For dahlias and canna lily, these two to three days are very important to give the time needed to develop the eyes that will become next season's plants. For most of these plants, a spading fork is the best tool but for dahlias the better tool is a shovel so you can sever the fine feeder roots that have developed under the tubers. Be sure to loosen the soil in a generous area around the bulbs before digging them. Curing is an important step in preserving bulbs. Curing involves slowly drying out the outer layer of the bulb so that it becomes tough which seals the moisture inside. Cure bulbs by air drying away from direct sun and wind. You can choose to wash the bulbs that you dig or you can just brush off the soil that will eventually dry as they are cured before they are stored. I don't wash bulbous roots as wet rootstock could set up the conditions for rot unless they are diligently dried before storage. The expert field is divided to wash or not to wash. You decide for yourself.

Storage is varied depending upon the rootstock. When lifting Dahlias, cut the stems back to 6 inches, cure for 4-7 days and store them between several layers of newspaper in cardboard boxes or in large paper bags in an area where the temperature remains between 5 C and 12 C. Caladium prefers to be cured for one to two weeks with its foliage intact. Once cured, remove the dried foliage and store in vermiculite at 10 C and 12 C. Gladiolus also needs curing for one to two weeks with the stems cut back to within 2.5 cm of the crown. Remove the bottom corm and store the cormels that have grown above it in mesh bags between 2 C and 5 C. Calla lily needs curing for 3 to 4 days and storage in vermiculite at a temperature between 10 C and 13 C. After canna lilies are lifted, cut back the tops to about 8 cm and cure only for a few hours. Dust with fungicide and store in vermiculite, sand or hang in mesh bags between 5 C and 10 C. Begonias should be lifted and the soil removed. Any damaged or rotted areas should be cut out and the cuts dusted with fungicide. Tubers should be cured for two to three weeks until stems easily detach and stored individually in paper bags or a cardboard box at a temperature between 10 C and 13 C.

It's reasonable to assume that few of us have multiple storage areas at temperatures to accommodate all variants perfectly, so generally speaking, just be sure to store the rootstock in an area that is dry and quite cool but not in a place that will freeze. You should check on the stored rootstock occasionally during the winter to ensure it is not rotting or drying out to the point of shriveling. If it is shriveling, then spritz the storage material with a little mist of

water. If it is rotting, then remove the rotted material and give the remainder additional air for a while before re-covering it.

Plants such as oxalis and calla lilies are often grown in pots in the summer. To over-winter oxalis, simply bring it inside, place it in a well lit room and grow it as a house plant. To over-winter potted calla lilies, cut back the foliage and let the soil in the pots go dry. Keep it in a cool, dark place. In the spring, remove the bulbs from the dry soil and re-pot them.

Most bulbs can be replanted directly into the ground when all danger of frost has passed next spring. However, begonias and caladiums should be started in shallow trays inside 6 weeks before the last frost (about May 15) and then transplanted after all danger of frost has passed. Caladiums can be potted individually when they develop roots before moving outside later on. Dahlias should be divided by removing the stems from the tubers, ensuring each tuber has an eye and potted indoors also 6 weeks before the last frost.

With a little planning, you can save the best of your tender “bulbs” and have beautiful blooms again next year.

Kathy MacPherson, Prince Edward County Master Gardener

For more information, visit our website at <https://pecmastergardeners.ca/>
or send us an email: pecmastergardeners@gmail.com