

Success with tender plants

Adam shows how to get the best from tender plants, including container growing, feeding and watering, plus what to do when temperatures start to dip later in the season

Succulents in pots bring an exotic touch to a sunny, sheltered spot and will revel in any summer droughts

PHOTO: SARAH CUTTLE

Tender plants provide a taste of the exotic, adding architectural interest to the garden, from succulents for containers to bold tropical plants for a border. Tender means that plants will be damaged or killed by low temperatures, whether it's one night of frost or a run of cold weather. Tender plants also need winter protection. That doesn't necessarily mean they need to be put in a greenhouse during the colder months – it could be as simple as lifting a tuber or wrapping a plant with fleece. So don't let that put you off – looking after tender plants isn't hard and they'll add variety, colour and drama to your garden. And at this time of year there's no need to worry about frost, so why not try going a little tropical?



Begonias are happy in light shade and will flower their socks off all summer long

Summer bedding plants

I have a soft spot for bedding plants – when I worked in the parks department, we grew a couple of hundred thousand every year from seeds and cuttings, and I loved it. They are a useful way of adding a burst of colour that will last right through the summer. And they can bring a new garden or border alive while you wait for small trees and shrubs to grow.

I use them mainly as fillers in containers, planting them in peat-free multi-purpose compost and feeding regularly with a liquid fertiliser. Most bedding is happy

in good garden soil too, and there's a wide choice available for sun or semi-shade.

Although these are short-lived or annual plants, they're easy to grow from seed and not expensive. They are widely available as plug plants in various sizes. Buying small plugs and growing them on indoors will save money, but will take more time, as they will need potting on.

Plant summer bedding outside once all danger of frost is over and deadhead regularly to encourage more flowers. Be sure to keep on top of watering too.



Most succulents grow best in pots, enjoying warmth, shelter and free-draining compost

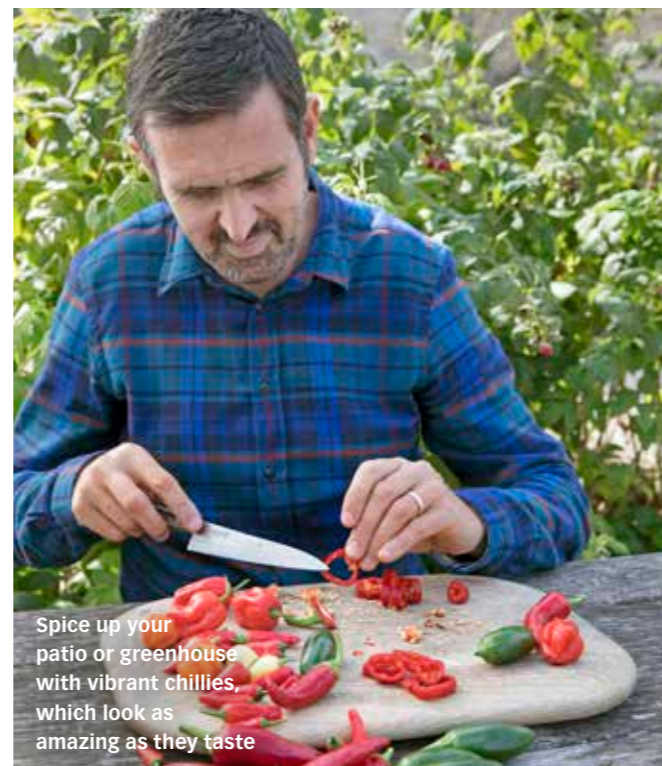
Succulents

Succulents come from arid regions, so they thrive in heat and tolerate drought. Their stems and leaves store water, so they can go for long periods without rain. I grow my succulents in containers, which I put in my gravel garden or on sunny steps where I can admire them up close.

Each year, I repot them in late spring using peat-free multi-purpose compost with a little soil and up to 40 per cent grit to improve drainage. I also add slow-release fertiliser.

I move my succulents outside in late May and give them a good water. Then I let the compost dry out before I water again. Take great care not to overwater. In milder parts of the UK, the more hardy succulents can stay outside all year, but keep them in a warm, sheltered spot, out of heavy winter rain or under a glass cloche.

Look out for aphids, slugs, snails, caterpillars and vine weevils. I pick these off by hand, but you can also treat with nematodes.



Spice up your patio or greenhouse with vibrant chillies, which look as amazing as they taste

Tender edibles

Lately I've become more adventurous with edible gardening. I've had success growing oca and *Apios americana*, both tubers that I plant out in pots or in the ground in late May or early June. Oca tastes great late in the season, has pretty clover-like leaves and flowers in late August to early September. Apios is a climber that produces edible beans. It grows more than 1.8m tall in the season and has dark crimson flowers.

Growing new veg, as well as favourites like tomatoes and chillies, is all about fun, with the added reward of something for the table. Tender edibles need heat, so if you haven't got a greenhouse, start them off in a conservatory or on a windowsill until it's warm enough to move them outside.

When planting out, choose a sheltered spot that gets plenty of sun. These plants don't like to dry out and need regular liquid feeding. Give tomatoes rich soil or peat-free potting compost. Water regularly and apply a high-potassium liquid feed every seven to ten days once they start to flower.

Tropical plants

The first person to spark my interest in tropical plants was Christopher Lloyd at Great Dixter. Spectacular favourites like cannas, ginger lilies and bananas have the power to carry us to a different place. The bold flowers are like an exuberant celebration, while the lush foliage seems to come alive in the summer rain.

Tropical plants are a diverse group, but in general they like free-draining, loose and fertile soil. Give them a sheltered spot or create a protective framework

of evergreen shrubs first, then add the tropical plants later. I can't commit a large area to tropical plants, so I grow mine in pots, then intermingle them in displays or sink a pot into a border to add a punch.

Not all tropical plants have to be lifted and brought indoors over winter. Tree ferns, bananas and palms are often fine just wrapped in fleece, while others may survive with a thick insulating mulch over their roots. So if you choose your plants carefully you can limit the extra workload.



Cannas make an exotic splash with just their leaves, even before the flowers appear



In pots or borders, salvias will keep flowering until the first frosts

Tender perennials

Salvias, dahlias and other tender perennials give valuable colour until late in the season. They can be grown in pots, but are also great gap fillers in borders. Plant out after the last frost in late spring, into soil enriched with garden compost or well-rotted manure.

With our warming climate, I can now leave dahlias in the ground over winter if I have chosen a spot that stays dry and I mulch them with composted bark. I treat salvias as annuals, taking cuttings early in the season to make next year's plants. I overwinter these in a greenhouse, where they take up less room than mature plants would. With borderline-hardy plants in pots, move them to a sheltered site over winter and wrap the pots with fleece or hessian to insulate the roots.

Adam's tips for overwintering tender plants

■ Get to know your local conditions.

Growing tender plants in north-east Scotland will be a different experience to growing them in Cornwall. Very wet or exposed locations will also affect the hardiness of plants, so it's important to familiarise yourself with your own site. Most gardens have different micro-climates that may provide extra shelter or be more prone to frost. Factor in your soil type too: is it free draining or heavy, staying wet and cold over winter? All these things will affect how well tender plants fare. The decision as to whether to bring them inside or leave them outside over winter will depend on the plant, the site and your local climate.

■ **Start to think about protecting** your plants or bringing them in around the end of September, before temperatures drop.

■ **If storing indoors** over winter, lift tender plants before the first frosts and keep them in their pots in a dormant state. Make sure they're somewhere frost free.

■ **If leaving in the ground**, mulch the soil surface over the root zone in autumn. Use garden compost, well-rotted manure or composted bark in a layer at least 5cm thick. Straw can also work well.

■ **In colder regions**, it's safer to store the tubers of tender plants like begonias and dahlias in a frost-free place such as a shed or a garage attached to a house. Dry off the tubers and keep an eye on them over winter for signs of disease or rotting.

■ **Move potted tender shrubs and perennials** indoors, into a frost-free greenhouse or conservatory.

■ **Insulate containers** that are too large to move under cover using several layers of hessian or fleece.

■ **Keep plants tidy** in the greenhouse over winter, as this will help to avoid fungal problems and pests. Watch out for vine weevils, especially in pots of plants such as fuchsias and begonias – notched leaf edges can be a tell-tale sign.

■ **Start to harden off** tender plants in late spring, gradually acclimatising them to outdoor conditions. Open the greenhouse door during the day or move plants outside then bring them back indoors over night.

■ **Plant them outside again** after all risk of hard frosts is over, usually by late May.



Move succulent aeoniums into a greenhouse over winter, adding fleece for extra protection



Lift dahlia tubers in colder regions – brush off the soil and store in a dry, frost-free place

Adam on TV

Catch up with Adam and the rest of the *Gardeners' World* team on Fridays throughout July (except 14 July). Check TV listings for full details.

