



*Gardeners Helping Gardeners Succeed*

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# Winterizing Broadleaf Evergreens

The effects of winterkill are often slow to appear. A plant will seem to come through the winter unscathed, but as spring develops the edges of leaves turn brown, the bark may split, and eventually a branch may be lost, sometimes the entire plant. The plant goes largely dormant, neither taking in moisture nor transpiring it (i.e. venting through the leaves). But on warm, sunny days in midwinter, such as during the traditional February thaw, the leaves may begin to transpire. The roots, however, buried in the still-frozen ground, are unable to replace the lost water. If there is a brisk wind the effects are accelerated and the plant becomes desiccated. All broadleaf evergreens are prone to this calamity but rhododendrons are especially vulnerable as their leaves tend to be bigger than those of other evergreens.

Luckily there are ways to prevent, or at least to minimize, the effects of winterkill. Part of the remedy is to **make sure your plants go into the winter in a healthy state**. The other is to protect their exposed surfaces once cold weather sets in by coating them with an **anti-desiccant spray**. Experts like to say that a good way to get a plant through the winter is to take care of it the previous summer, and this is certainly true of rhododendrons. Summer droughts weaken plants, so make sure they are adequately watered during the hot months and into the fall. Be sure to maintain your vigilance during the autumn—a lovely dry Indian summer stretch can prove to be damaging. Replenish the mulch around plants and take care of insect or disease problems.

**Water thoroughly before the ground freezes.** Even if there has been normal rainfall during November, the single most important thing you can do for broadleaf evergreens is give them an adequate water supply before the ground freezes. Once every two weeks water the soil around your plants to a depth of 18 inches to 2 feet. Keep this up until the ground freezes. Not only does this provide an insurance supply of moisture that the plants may need later, it also slows the actual freezing of the soil, as water must give off heat in order to freeze. Check to see that your mulch is adequate: a two to three inch layer of shredded bark mulch will keep the soil from freezing too abruptly.

**Apply an anti-desiccant.** Before the ground freezes, spray your broadleaf evergreens with an anti-desiccant. These substances are available as ready-to-use sprays or as a concentrate that can be mixed with water and applied with a standard sprayer. Choose a day when the temperature is above 40 degrees, so that the mixture can dry properly, and be sure to coat both sides of the leaves. The mixture acts as a sealant, preventing excessive amounts of moisture from escaping.

**Shield exposed plants.** Plants of questionable hardiness or those especially exposed to bitter winter winds may need additional protection. A simple screen will break the force of the wind without reducing proper air flow. Screens can be made of burlap nailed to wooden stakes or of lath fencing that is sold in rolls. However, do not wrap plants in plastic. This cuts off air circulation and on a sunny day it can act as an oven.

**Renew the anti-desiccant.** Most sprays rarely last through the winter. Apply in October and reapply each month through March, making sure that all surfaces, top and bottom, are coated. Water your plants again when the ground thaws and be careful about brushing snow off plants. They are extremely brittle and easily damaged.