

# MESSENGER-INQUIRER



**October 15, 2022**

## **Protect Tender Bulbs for the Winter**

Some of the flowering plants we enjoy may need their food storage structure protected throughout the winter to keep them from year to year. Plants such as cannas, elephant ears, dahlias, caladiums, tuberous begonias, and gladiolus are considered tender bulbs. I cannot imagine a garden without them. They take more care than other plants, but the time is worth it to save them for the garden next year and avoid purchasing more.

To dig and store cannas, wait until the tops of the plants have been killed by frost. Allow them to dry for several days. Then cut the tops back, leaving 3 to 4 inches of stem. Next, carefully lift the rhizomes and roots with a fork or spade. A rhizome is an enlarged underground horizontal stem growing at, or just below, soil level. Roots are produced at the bottom of the rhizome. Shake the soil loose and allow them to dry for a day or two.

Store the canna rhizomes in a cool, moderately dry area where the temperature will not exceed 50 degrees F. Do not allow rhizomes to freeze. Place rhizomes on racks or hang them in mesh bags so air can circulate freely around the clumps.

In the spring, each clump can be planted in full or divided. Because new growth buds are in the old stem base, be sure a portion of the old stem base is included with each division.

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Elephant ears are ready to dig after a light frost. The tubers are dug and stored like the canna rhizomes. A tuber is an enlarged underground stem with buds where the plant will emerge when it begins growing again.

Dahlia tuberous roots are ready to remove from the garden when the plant is darkened by frost. A tuberous root is an enlarged, underground root with buds located near the base of the stem. Cut the top back to 4 to 6 inches and lift gently with a fork or spade. Remove as much soil as possible without damaging roots. Save tuberous roots from healthy plants. Allow them to air dry for several hours, then store them in a dry, cool, frost-proof area.

Divide the tuberous roots soon after digging because buds are easier to see in the fall. Each tuberous root must have at least one bud because the bud produces the plant.

When the tops of caladiums and tuberous begonias are injured by the first frost, gently lift the plant and cut back the stem to the soil line. Leave the ball of tubers, roots, and soil intact. Place the soil and root masses in a dry, cool area, and allow the tubers to cure for two to three weeks. Then remove soil, stalks, and roots. Store tubers at 50 degrees F in low humidity.

Gladiolus corms should be dug after the first frost. Some gardeners dig corms of early flowering cultivars six to eight weeks after flowering, well before frost; this is not necessary. However, it is critical to allow all corms to mature as fully as possible before digging.

A corm is a swollen, solid stem that stores food. The food is used during the growing season and the old corm shrivels away. A new gladiolus corm forms immediately above the old one. The new corm will produce flowers next year. Small corms called cormels form around the base of the new corm. Cormels will require two to three years to reach blooming size.

Dig corms of healthy plants with a fork or spade so the entire plant can easily be removed by grasping the top and pulling it from the soil. Avoid injuring corms while handling. Shake off

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loose soil and discard damaged, discolored, or diseased corms. Cut the top off 1 to 2 inches above the corm. Save the small cormels. Allow corms to dry in the sun for one or two days.

For best storage results, cure the corms at a temperature of 80 to 85 degrees F for two to three weeks. Avoid fluctuating temperatures that cause moisture condensation on the corms and create a favorable condition for disease development. When thoroughly cured, the old corm should be broken from the base of the new one and discarded. Two to three additional days at 80 degrees F will hasten the formation of a corky layer at the scar.

For winter storage, place the corms in paper boxes, open paper bags, cloth bags, wooden trays with screen bottoms, or old onion sacks. Stack or hang the containers so air can move around them. Store the corms at 35 to 40 degrees F in low humidity. A cool basement is good. Be sure to check them periodically throughout the winter and discard those that show signs of rotting.

For more information about storing tender bulbs, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or [annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu](mailto:annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu).

## **Annette's Tips:**

If you have problems with cannas, dahlias, caladiums, and tuberous begonias drying out in storage, place them in dry peat, sand, sawdust, or vermiculite.

## **Upcoming Event:**

“Native Plants, Why Do They Matter?” will be presented by Jeff Nelson, President of the Kentucky Native Plant Society, on October 26 at 1:00 p.m. at the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service Office at 4800A New Hartford Rd. on the OCTC campus. The program is

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sponsored by the Green River Area Extension Master Gardener Association and the Daviess  
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