

“Is it okay to have the plants on site for a week before we plant them? Do we need to water them? Do they need any protection from freezing?” We hear these questions frequently and here are some generalized answers that may help.

Best care is at the nursery

It is likely no great surprise that the best care and storage for your plants is at the nursery. As much as you can, wait to get your plants until you are only a day or two away from planting—it’s most important to cut it as close as possible when the weather is very hot or very cold, as you’ll read below. In rare cases, this might mean you need to pay an extra storage fee to the nursery, but that may cost you less than having the plants die before they’re even in the ground.

Cold weather protection

Our practice is to acclimate plants to normal outdoor temperature fluctuation of the season before they go to the customer; this is called “hardening-off”. From any nursery, insist that the plants be cold hardy before you take them.

The roots are the most vulnerable part of the plant, so focus on insulating the pots during below-freezing conditions. Place the plants with the pots tightly spaced—offset rows with no gaps. Usually this is sufficient to protect them. If you anticipate a severe cold snap, wrap a tarp around a block of plants or shovel bark, leaves, or mulch around the pots. It also can make a big difference where you store them: out of the wind and in the shelter of trees or a building is preferable. Lastly, the soil in the pots should be moist (the plants should come from the nursery well-watered), because water releases heat as it freezes (no kidding!), offering some protection to the roots.

Drought protection

During the growing season, only accept plants that are well-watered: the pots should be heavy when they leave the nursery. Even so, the moisture in the pots will dry up within a couple days in hot weather, and then they will need more water; as soon as the pots feel light, irrigate them again. Do not wait for signs of wilting—by that point the plants are stressed. As with cold weather protection, choosing a sheltered/shady spot may make your job easier.

Once you put the plants in the ground, they should be watered-in as well; please see our info sheets on planting and irrigation for more information.