

## Plants love the winter

The end of the fall certainly brought freezing temperatures our way and many planting projects have been put on hold. While most of the country still has months of winter ahead with frozen ground that is usually not the case for us in western Washington! Our mild winters create excellent conditions for establishing plants on a variety of sites.

The cool, wet weather of winter is ideal for minimizing transplant shock; transpiration is low and ample moisture is available even on normally drier sites. Many species will grow roots through the winter months, with most active growth in the early spring. Overall, the earlier plants go into the ground, the more time they have to adapt to a site and develop new roots before the demands of the growing season and summer drought. This translates into lower irrigation needs and more vigorous growth than for spring plantings. In turn leading to more success for you!

## Plant storage and care on site

When cold weather is upon us we will frequently hear questions such as, “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 have 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. It is best to wait until you are only a day or two away from planting before receiving your plants—it’s most important to cut it as close as possible when the weather is very cold, as you’ll read below. It is also best to call the nursery ahead to be sure the plants are able to be pulled. 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

Acclimating plants to normal outdoor temperature fluctuation of the season reduces the amount of shock and stress put on a plant at outplanting. This process should be completed before the plants go to the customer; it is called “hardening-off”. From any nursery, insist that the plants be cold hardy before you take them.

We all know the roots are the most vulnerable part of the plant, so the focus should be 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 during our normal winter weather patterns. If you anticipate a severe cold snap, wrap a tarp around a block of plants or shovel bark, leaves, or mulch around the pots. Another key factor is *where* you store the plants: 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.