

Winter Garden Tips

Information provided by the Department of Parks and Recreation

1. Mulch Heavily

- Now is the perfect time to grab those leaves in the street and cover your garden. You can use shredded wood mulch, aged wood chips, leaves, straw, etc. Pile as much mulch around your plants as possible.
- Just remember anything over two inches may stop water from reaching your plant. If you have more than 2 inches of mulch, make sure to pull the mulch back to water.



- Winter gardens don't need much water. Water only when the soil is dry and water during the warmest part of the day. Similar to the rest of the year, avoid getting water on the actual plant. Just water the soil.

2. Wind Breaks

- The harshest winter winds in DC come from North East but it's a good idea to have winter breaks on all sides of your garden. Windbreaks can be row covers, shrubs, evergreen trees, fences, straw bales, etc. It's a good idea to plant larger perennial plants on the north side of your garden.
- If you're designing a new garden, try to put the north side of the garden against a fence or house.



3. Individual Covers

- Repurpose plastic and glass containers to cover plants. Remove these containers at least once a week and on really sunny days to prevent overheating, increase circulation and water.



4. Low Tunnels

- It is recommended that you use Agribon or Reemay brand row covers. These are breathable row covers that can be used to create low tunnels to protect winter gardens. The higher the numbers associated with the row cover, the more winter protection there will be, and the less light can get in. For example, Agribon 15 allows 90 percent light to get in but is less protective as Agribon 50 allows 50 percent of the light to get in. The less light, the less growth. But the thicker the cover, the better protection there is.
- The main benefits of row covers are to create a wind block and keep frost from touching the plants. Use lower levels to increase sunlight and plant growth.
- The best part of row covers is it's breathable, so it doesn't have to be removed at all, except to harvest. Rainwater can drip through the covers, reducing the need to water. This is the best low-maintenance option.



Materials Used

Hoops

- PVC is the easiest but will leach toxins in the sunlight.
- Conduit is the strongest, but you will need a specialized hoop bender to bend it.
- 9-Gauge or larger (lower the number = larger the gauge) galvanized metal wire
 - will need metal/bolt cutters

Clamps/Weights

- Secure the north side with landscape staples or the side that won't be harvested from. Roll up the sides and secure a landscape staple over the rolled side, pinching it to the ground. This should prevent any ripping.
- The side that will be removed often to be harvested, secure with bricks, heavy stakes, rocks, etc. Landscape staples that are removed often may tear your cover more frequently.

5. Plastic Covers/low tunnels

- Making a low tunnel from plastic sheets will capture more heat and provide a better windbreak than row covers. The draw back is it requires more maintenance.
- Remove covers to ventilate at least once a week and during very sunny days. Water will not penetrate plastic so monitor the soil and water when soil is dry.
- If you're using the plastic for just a season or two, any plastic will work. Drop cloth plastic is a great option. If you're building a permanent plastic low tunnel with a frame that can be used multiple years on multiple gardens, think about purchasing hoop house plastic that has a UV protective coating.

Plastic installed onto a garden



Plastic frame constructed for any plot



Options to Increase Ventilation

- Buy plastic with slits or cut small slits and holes into the plastic to keep the cover ventilated.



- Use row cover. On days/weeks when the winter is exceptionally bad, drape plastic over the row cover for extra protection. Remove at least once a week and monitor soil for dryness. The row cover will block some of the solar heat slightly decreasing the chances of overheating.



- Use row cover and cover the sides with plastic but leave the top open for ventilation and for water to enter.



6. Cold Frames

- Cold frames are a great way to insulate and protect your winter garden. You can buy cold frames or make a cold frame very cheaply.

- The top of a cold frame can be a window frame, shower door, or a greenhouse poly-sheet. If possible tilt the top toward the south.
- The sides of the cold frame can be wood, straw bales, cinder blocks, or more greenhouse poly.
- Open up the window at least once a week and monitor the soil for dryness.



7. Use water to retain heat.

- In gardens where the heat is sufficiently blocked, use water containers (milk jugs, water bottles, 2 liters, etc.) to capture heat for the night.
- Paint the south side with flat black enamel paint and the north side with white enamel paint. This will allow sun heat to be absorbed through the black and retained by the white.
- Add salt to the water to help retain heat.

