



Storing Tender Bulbs

Tender bulbs, corms, tubers, and the like, are those that require digging and storage in parts of the country with cold winters, usually USDA hardiness zones 1-7. Obviously, in Northeastern Ohio (zones 5-6), we get our fair share of snow and freezing temperatures where tender bulbs like **Cannas, Dahlias, Gladiolas, Caladium, Alocasia, Calla Lilies, Tuberous Begonias** and even **Geraniums** can be lifted and stored to enjoy next season. Some hints to keep in mind about storing these tender bulbs:

- Make sure the bulbs are cleaned, cured (dried), and the storage medium (perlite, peat, potting soil, etc.) is dry.
- The storage area should be dark, dry and cool, above freezing, (40-60 degrees F).
- Store in breathable containers, growing pots, mesh bags, cardboard boxes. Do not use sealed plastic bags or airtight storage containers unless you want to encourage rot and fungal problems.
- Check the bulbs periodically for problems and/or growth.

When to start digging? The most tender of bulbs like Alocasia, Caladium, and Begonias need to be dug just before or immediately after the first fall frost (late September or early October in Ohio). Many of the other bulbs can tolerate a few light frosts, which will trigger their natural dormancy. Dig when they begin to yellow and die-back, well before a hard freeze. When it's time, loosen the soil, gently lift with a pitchfork or shovel, shake off excess soil, and cut the stems/foilage down to a few inches.

How long do you cure/dry the bulbs? Most bulbs will dry within a few days to a week or two. Bring them into a well ventilated, shady, frost-free area (garage, basement, covered porch, etc.) to dry out or cure. The remainder of stem will brown and wither indicating that the bulb is dry and ready to store.

What is the best material to use for storage and where? The best storage medium is new, dry peat moss or a sterile peat based potting soil because it is free from disease and pest problems, and it will slow the moisture loss from the bulbs to alleviate any shrinking. A cool basement or root cellar is ideal because it is temperature controlled, dark, and hopefully free of rodent problems.

Why do my bulbs get smaller or rot over winter? These common problems can be avoided if the bulbs are cured or dried properly, dusted with Sulfur, and stored in fresh, dry peat or a similar dry, clean storage medium and ventilated containers. Store in temperatures just above freezing; if the area is too warm this may cause rotting. Low humidity can cause desiccation or shrinking, so the peat or soil may need to be lightly misted once a month through the winter. Inspect stored bulbs monthly.

Can I use sawdust and newspaper to pack and store my bulbs? Both choices are fine, but make sure they are dry to begin with.

Can I over-winter tender bulbs in the pot they were growing in? Yes, in this case, stop watering and let the soil and bulb(s) dry out in the sun for a couple of days. Move the container into a cool, shady area to completely dry out and store above freezing temperatures. Remove the foliage as it dies back. Water lightly as needed during winter and slowly increase water as new growth appears in spring.

Should I divide tender bulbs in the fall? Yes, if you are familiar where to divide them. If not, it is better to wait and divide tender bulbs in the spring. The "eyes", side shoots, and new growth will be actively growing and is easily distinguished from the older or unviable parts of the bulb.

*In April, give tender bulbs a head start by potting them up and growing indoors, or wait until mid to late May to plant them directly into your garden.