

## HOME AND GARDEN

# Careful planning is required to prepare plants for holidays

The lilies, glads and dahlias you planted not so long ago are coming up nicely and the colourful pots of begonias on the patio are blooming profusely.

Now that all the hard work is done, it's finally time to kick back and relax at the cottage for a month or so.

The following, from the Netherlands Flowerbulb Information Cen-

tre, are a few tips to help ensure that your time out isn't a time of stress for your plants and that your return won't be greeted by dying plants and a wilderness of weeds.

### Quick checklist

- ✓ Move containers and hanging baskets into a cool, shady spot and arrange for a neighbour to water them while you're away
- ✓ Water all plants thoroughly and

remove faded blooms or those in full flower.

- ✓ Mulch beds and containers to help conserve moisture.

- ✓ Stand hanging baskets over a large bucket of water in a shady spot. Cut a strip of lantern wick, or use a couple of shoelaces, and push one end into the soil; the other end into the water. This will ensure a small, but steady supply of water from the bucket into the basket while you're gone. (This is considered a capillary watering system.)
- ✓ Mow the lawn
- ✓ Remove houseplants from windowsills and place them into a container filled with moist peat.

- ✓ If away for more than a week in the summer, and if you can't rely on your neighbour's kindness, set up a home-made capillary watering system for untended houseplants.

### Summer Holidays

Mow the lawn just before leaving. If the weather has been very dry, don't cut it too short and leave the clippings on the lawn. If you have time, remove weed seedlings to prevent an invasion and remove any flowers in full bloom to prevent them from running to seed.

Give borders a thorough soaking, however if time is limited, concentrate your efforts on thirstier flowers and more recent plantings. To help retain the water, keep the soil cool and suppress weed growth; add a two to three-inch layer of a mulch such as wood chips, other bark or well rotted manure.

**Tip:** In hot, dry summers, when watering can become a time-consuming chore, it's worth growing more drought-resistant plants. Some summer-flowering bulbs, such as ornamental onions (*Alliums*), Peruvian lily (*Alstroemeria*) and nerines, to name a few, fall into this category.

### Container care

Plants in pots and hanging baskets must be watered regularly. If you can't arrange for a neighbour to care for them, invest in an automatic watering system.

In either event, move pots and hanging baskets into a lightly shaded spot where they won't dry out so quickly. This will also make it easier for watering, or setting up a drip system. Most plants will be fine, for a while, in a lightly shaded spot, especially tuberous begonias and many of the lilies.

Smaller pots are more prone to drying out, so are best sunk either into the garden soil or into another container filled with moist peat or compost.

Mulch all containers with a layer of bark to conserve as much moisture as possible.

### Help for houseplants

If a neighbour is caring for your plants, leave full instructions on how much water to give each of them. Overwatering kills more often than under watering.

Remove all plants from windowsills, out of direct sunshine, and place them together to create a more humid atmosphere. If fending for themselves, water them all thoroughly before leaving and remove any dead leaves, faded flowers or those in full bloom. Then place them all inside another container filled with moist peat.

Smaller plants can be popped into a plastic bag and sealed with a rubber band. Blow into the bag first, or support it with plant canes to keep the plastic off the foliage.

If you are away for more than a week, it's best to set up a self-watering device.

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