

Zonal Denial

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Zonal denial is defined as an attempt to grow plants which are normally limited to milder winter hardiness zones! As one's palette is expanded and one becomes an enthusiastic gardener, desirable and "must-have" plants become an obsession.

Thus enters a new psychosis!

This apparently is not a new term to gardeners in Anchorage, Alaska (zone 4) where, a 1997 public radio show interview with a gardener stated they frequently attempt to grow plants outside their zone. According to Dennis Schrader, co-author of the book **Hot Plants for Cool Climates**, many plants can be grown if you are willing to mulch with six feet of mulch.

The idea is that if one plant out of many survives one to three winters, it will have adapted and will survive indefinitely. However, there is a down side to this. "Many plants may survive one to two tough winters, but are progressively weakened and might fail during a milder third winter," according to an article written by Lovett Pinetum, who has been practicing this tough game for 25 years, with a staggeringly high ratio of losers to winners.

On November 21, 2001, it was 57 degrees outside, unusual for that time of the year. Winter preparation of the garden has gone on for several weeks without interruption and, thus, our fall/pre-winter chores are done. The dahlias are dug, the canna's are tucked away, fall bulbs are planted (and dug and replanted by the squirrels who apparently didn't like the original design) and tender evergreens have been burlapped for wind protection or tied together to prevent breakage from winter snow loads. Everything is well watered in, and yet we look around the garden trying to find something more to do. Petunias are still pushing a bloom or two, *Lonicera sempervirens* and *Clematis* 'The President' are re-blooming and many of the perennials we planted as annuals are being looked at with, "well since there is nothing else to do, may be if it's mulched, it will survive the winter."

The problem this year with many of the marginally hardy plants, particularly with conifers, is that they have put on new growth with the mild fall. These will not have had a chance to harden off and tip die back should be expected next spring.

So as I burlap and mulch my *Cunninghamia lanceolata* (common china fir, zone [6] 7-8), I hope beyond my wildest dreams to enjoy this conifer one more year. The price of the plant was \$25. Amortized over the two years it has been growing in my garden the cost is down to \$12.50/year! One more year and it drops to \$8.35. My neighbors watch with skepticism as I rake in mountains of mulch over my prize plants and wonder if they should do the same. Too late though, I already shredded their piles of leaves on the terrace and bagged them for my use!

Oh, how I would love to gloat at Frank Greer if my *Helleborus foetidus* makes it through the winter and blooms. Meanwhile I moved in my *Musa* ssp. 'Nana', a dwarf (?) banana plant. Its taken over the dinning area, toping out at 12 feet with 6-foot leaves. Supposedly it should flower and produce fruit after 18 months of growing, but then the plant dies? At \$.29/lb it would be cheaper to buy bananas at the grocery store, but where's the fun in that? Besides, I really don't like bananas.

So, if zonal denial is a psychosis, as long I can continue to justify the work and money I spend on marginally hardy plants, I am happy. I have one bad attribute. I am always so disappointed each year in the losses and should start to face the fact I was pushing the limits. Zonal denial? Go for it! Check out Michael Dirr's Web site at Noble Plants and read the article about *Hydrangea macrophylla* (zone 6!), a cultivar found to be hardy in Minnesota! You just might be lucky and get rich!

—Sandy Allen