Winterizing in Fall

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Important steps to provide a healthy spring for your pond

Getting your pond ready for winter really begins in the fall. Water temperature, rather than air temperature, is the important indicator of when it's best to make changes to your pond. To prepare your fish and pond for a healthy spring, the first tool you will need is a thermometer. Tie a string to one end of the thermometer, then tie the other end of the string to a rock on the side of the pond for easy retrieval.

Fish Care

When the water temperature in the pond decreases to the lower 70s (°F), it's a good time to switch your fish food to a wheat germ base that is more easily digested. As the temperatures cool, it is harder for fish to digest food properly. Even though your fish need to bulk up for winter, be careful not to overfeed. You can feed 2-3 times a day what they'll eat in 5 minutes or less, then remove any excess food. Once the water temperature falls to 50°F, the bacteria in a fish's digestive system are no longer able to process food efficiently. Switch to a wheat gern food and stop feeding when the temperature reaches 40°F.

Plant Care

It's always a good idea to trim and remove any dying plant material as it appears, so it does not add to debris build up. Fall is a great time to divide and repot plants. The mild temperatures will give the plant time to heal its root system before cold temperatures arrive, and will most likely provide more blooms the following summer if properly fertilized. In northern climates when temperatures get below 60°F, tropical plants should be brought inside or disposed of, along with surface and submersed plants, as required by zone. Trim the bog plants back and pull lilies out to trim them before frost. Then set all plants to the bottom, given the pond is deep enough to keep from freezing to the bottom in the winter.

Water Change

All this moving about may stir up things so it's a good time for a water change. You'll need to remove some of the excess debris or it will continue to decompose, using up oxygen and producing hydrogen sulfide, a toxic gas. A fine weave aquarium net works well to sift out excess sludge. No need to completely drain and remove every bit of mud and debris as a small amount is very helpful to the inhabitants for burrowing. A water change can be done anytime in the fall, but will create less discomfort to you if it's done before the water temperature goes below 60°F. If a 50% water change still leaves the water murky the next day, try another. Remember to use dechlorinator if your tap water contains chlorine.

Debris Control

WATER TEMPERATURE GUIDE
FOR WINTERIZING YOUR POND

72°F

- 50% water change
- Divide and repot plants

60°F

- Mix staple diet with wheat germ
- Bring in or dispose of tropical plants
- Install pond net

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When the first leaf falls, it's time to cover the entire pond with netting. It's just about impossible to keep netting every leaf out by hand, and it saves a lot of time. The net is barely visible and is stretched and anchored on the sides of the pond. It is very important to make sure the netting is above the surface of the water. As leaves gather, just remove the anchors on one side and flip them off. Then re-anchor. If you have a skimmer it's not as dangerous to go "without a net" but the skimmer's net should be checked and debris emptied out daily.

Do I Need a Heater?

In cooler climates leave the netting on until the pond surface starts to freeze over. Then when you remove the net, you can set in the heater. A pond heater does not actually heat the pond but instead keeps its immediate area from freezing. This allows for toxic gasses to be released and oxygen to enter the pond. In warmer climates where ponds don't freeze over, the pumps and aerators need to continue running year round. If the water temperature gets into the low 40s (F), it will be helpful to the fish if these are lifted at least a foot from the bottom of the pond.

Pump Care

When it gets below 40°F then the main pump can be removed, and filters thoroughly cleaned. Do not leave the pump running on the bottom of the pond. It will lower the temperature of the entire pond too low for fish to survive and can force them to use up all their stored fat just trying to stay still.

All your efforts will pay off in the spring with a healthier pond and healthier fish.

Just because it seems like the pond will be "sleeping" for a while, doesn't mean it will look ugly. A frozen pond can be very beautiful, especially if you installed underwater lighting. The effect is awesome!

RELATED INFORMATION:

- Fall and Winter Feeding Tips
- Proper Pond Care for Over-Winter Success
- Pond De-Icer Comparison Chart
- Pond Care in Frigid Temperatures
- Winter Pond FAQs

when leaves begin to fall

50°F

- Change food to wheat germ

45°F

- Trim hardy water lilies and move to deeper water

40°F

- Stop feeding fish

BELOW 40°F

- Move or remove pump
- Install De-Icer

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