

Winterizing the tropical garden



IRENE VIRAG

And so winter hovers, frost kills and we're not in denial any more. It's the season for life and death decisions in the garden. For storing dahlias and cannas and making sure the banana plants and the brugmansias that looked so great by the pool are safe from the big chill.

Every year I hem and haw about taking coleus cuttings and finally console myself with the thought that it's more fun to buy new varieties in the spring. I have the same debate with myself over the peach and yellow abutilons with flowers that look as if they're fashioned from crepe paper. As gardeners know, you have to let certain things go.

But some sacrifices are harder than others. Life would be pallid without the elephant ears that beckon mysteriously to me outside the sliding glass door of my bedroom in the shadows of summer evenings. And I was bereft the winter I let the *Tibouchina* die.

So as the ground cooled and I faced the labor of lugging my banana plants into the garage, I decided to draw inspiration from my friend, Richard Iversen, professor of horticulture at Farmingdale State University. He approaches the winter with boundless energy, unlimited expertise and nerves of steel. Richard is the curator of the Department of Ornamental Horticulture's teaching gardens, which include the tropical garden — a treasure all of you should visit next summer.

I had been to the garden on the cusp of fall and looked up in envy at 15-foot castor bean plants that grew from seeds and at towering elephant ears that made mine look like munchkins. I stared down in admiration at the gold and purple foliage of *Tradescantia spathacea* Vittata, also known as Moses-in-the-boat. I oohed at stunning varieties of variegated *Acalypha*, especially *Marginata* with its pink-bordered foliage. I aahed at yellow-striped *Sanchezia speciosa*. I felt as if I'd stepped into a transporter and been reassembled somewhere in the Caribbean.

Richard, who has been nurturing the garden for 10 years, was already planning its seasonal dismantling. "You just can't save it all," he said. He invited me to come back when the tropics would come out of the cold.

I returned on a gorgeous fall day that had inserted itself into a cold spell — as if

Mother Nature was sticking her tongue out at Jack Frost. But change was in progress as Richard and 20 students from his herbaceous plants class got tough with the tropics.

Jose Coreas, a 26-year-old landscape development major from North Babylon, was cutting a 7-foot-tall *Brugmansia* down to half its size. The plant's fragrant trumpet-shaped flowers were still in bloom but Jose never hesitated. "By the time it's being planted in the spring, it'll be full and beautiful," he said.

Sophomores Samantha Biderman of Merrick and Darryl Knight of Greenlawn moved in with shovels and dug up the pruned plant. They shook the dirt from its roots and carted it to a potting station.

And so it went with the banana trees and *Acalypha* and hibiscus. Cuttings of *Strobilanthes* and *Sanchezia* and *Cuphea* and *Alternanthera* were already rooting in the greenhouse. The elephant ears were on the agenda for a weekend lab and the cannas got a few weeks grace. They can withstand a nip of frost but have to

be dug out before the ground freezes.

If over-wintering space is at a premium, it may help to know that elephant ears and cannas don't have to be stored in soil — they'll survive bare root in a crate in a frost-free garage. As for castor beans, Richard lets the seeds ripen, then harvests them for propagation in the greenhouse.

The very word greenhouse makes me, well, green with envy. Not only do I lack the proper space for a green-

house but since my house is on a slab, I don't even have a basement. Everything that doesn't fit in my attic has to be jammed into the garage. It's a 1½-car garage, which is strange because I've never seen a half-car. Anyway, I have to walk a gauntlet even before I start carrying in plants.

I have to be better at making decisions about what gets left behind in the garden. Even Richard sacrifices some plants to the elements. Like I said, he's got nerves of steel. "How many banana plants do we have?" he asked students at the potting station. "Five, six, seven. Let's only pot 12. Throw the rest away. Oh, keep a good luck 13th."

At the station, Melodie Downing, a senior who is president of the horticulture club, and Stephanie Garay, who gave up her career as a respiratory therapist for the garden world, were shoveling a mix of sand, mulch and tree bark around the uprooted banana plants and brugmansias nestled in 5-gallon and 7-gallon black plastic pots.

Literally field commanders,

Richard and assistant curator Kevin Daly ran about giving instructions. "Cut to the joint," Kevin told Jose. "I want just one trunk."

"OK, let's get these into the greenhouse," Richard said as Michael Clarke of Seaford and John Bolan of Flushing pulled a cart of plants through a mud puddle.

Stephanie summed up the season's poignancy when she said, "This is depressing, I'd rather be planting." But the students clearly took satisfaction in their labor. Besides, it's not as if they won't get credit for it. The care and feeding of the tropical garden — and the dismantling, too — are all part of the horticulture curriculum.

I wouldn't dare grade Richard's students, but I give the garden an A-plus.

Write to Irene Virag at 1019 Fort Salonga Rd., Suite 10, #302, Northport, NY 11768 or email irenevirag@optonline.net. Visit her blog at www.irenevirag.com.



NEWSDAY PHOTOS / KEN SPENCER

Farmingdale State University's tropical garden is stripped for winter.



Winter preparation includes dividing and storing banana trees. Professor Richard Iversen, second from left, directs the effort.