

A simple guide to overwintering bonsai

Practical winter care for members' trees in UK gardens. No special equipment needed.

The golden rule: hardy outdoor bonsai need winter dormancy — protect the roots from prolonged hard frost, not from all cold weather.

1 Know your tree

Hardy outdoor: hawthorn, larch, hornbeam, many maples, pines and junipers usually stay outdoors. **Less hardy:** olives and some Mediterranean species need extra frost protection. **Tropical:** ficus must stay in a bright, warm, frost-free place. If unsure of the species, ask a club member before moving it.

2 Choose a sheltered position

Move small pots off exposed benches and out of strong, drying winds. A sheltered corner, under a bench, or a cold frame can help. Keep drainage holes clear and avoid standing pots in water.

3 Protect the pot and roots

During prolonged hard frosts, group pots together and insulate around the **pot** using bark mulch, fleece or hessian. A cold frame or unheated greenhouse can help, but ventilate on sunny days and check that temperatures remain suitable.

4 Water when needed

Winter trees use less water, but can still dry out — especially evergreens in wind. Check the compost below the surface. Water when it is becoming dry and thawed, ideally during a milder part of the day. Do not follow a fixed weekly schedule.

Quick comparison: what helps — and what to avoid

BETTER	AVOID
Sheltered spot with light and drainage	Warm living room for hardy outdoor trees
Insulate vulnerable shallow pots	Pots left exposed in persistent freezing wind
Check soil before watering	Waterlogged or bone-dry compost

Keep checking through winter

5 Go easy on feeding and heavy work

Dormant outdoor trees generally do not need fertiliser. Some species can be pruned or wired in winter, but avoid major work during severe frost. Repotting and root pruning are normally planned around the species' appropriate late-winter or spring window.

6 Look out for problems

After frost, wind or storms, check for cracked pots, broken branches and loose tie-down wires. Remove rotting fallen leaves. Watch for pests and mould in crowded, poorly ventilated storage areas.

7 Be ready for changing weather

Mild spells may encourage early buds. Protect tender new growth if frost returns. An unheated greenhouse can heat up quickly in sunshine: open vents when needed. Adjust protection to your species and local forecast.

Your 30-second winter checklist

- ☐ I know whether my tree is hardy, frost-sensitive or tropical
- ☐ Pots are sheltered from persistent cold wind
- ☐ Vulnerable roots have protection during prolonged hard frost
- ☐ Soil moisture and drainage are checked regularly
- ☐ I have checked for pests, fallen leaves and damaged pots

Members' tip

Take a photo of your trees before winter and another in spring. It is a useful record of development — and we would love to feature your trees on our website and social media. Beginners' trees are welcome too!

South Staffs Bonsai Society • www.southstaffsbonsai.co.uk

Important: This is general UK winter guidance. Protection varies by species, pot size, tree health and local conditions. Ask the society if you are unsure.