

MICROFOAM THERMAL BLANKETS FOR PERENNIAL PLANTS

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Microfoam is a flexible, lightweight insulating material that can be used as a winter protection blanket over container grown perennials. Research carried out at the University of Maryland by Dr. Francis R. Gouin has been put into practice by several growers in western Connecticut.

The perennial plants were grown in plastic 4" pots during the summer or fall. These plants were grown in beds four feet wide and 20 to 50 feet long. The growing bed was constructed of 2 x 6 lumber on several inches of crushed stone for drainage.

All perennial plants were left in place over the winter. Previously, winter protection was provided by cumbersome salt hay which was not too satisfactory. Thus, Microfoam blanket was tried for this purpose.

The Foam blanket is available in rolls five feet wide. Before the covering was applied, the following steps were taken: The pots of plants were well watered and allowed to freeze with 1/2 to 1 inch of frost. A protective fungicide treatment of Captan or Benlate was dusted or sprayed on all plant parts. To keep the rodent population manageable, zinc phosphide treated oats or corn were placed in containers spaced 15 feet apart under the covering. The pesticide bait was placed in 10 oz. soup cans with one end removed and the top crimped to shed water. Small milk cartons were also used. This allowed for protection of bait and also gave the mice a cozy feeding station.

Once these steps were taken, the foam was rolled over the bed and drawn tight over the sides. It was held in place with batting tape stapled to

the wooden bed. A sheet of clear polyethylene was placed over the Microfoam to retard deterioration. Once the cover was fastened, the plastic cover and the foam were held in place by soil mounded about the edge of the bed.

The blanket remained in place until the perennials were uncovered in March with no additional water or care. The perennial plants came through the winter with few losses.

ADVANTAGES

Once the winter season is over, the covering can be rolled and stored for use another year.

Plants have a good green color when uncovered.

Plants grown in ground beds can be left in place with little danger of loss.

There is no structure to collapse on the plants.

Insulation value is enhanced with a snow cover.

DISADVANTAGES

Since the blanket is sealed, plants cannot be taken out early.

Some plants may sprout too early under the cover, especially during warm late winter periods.

Visual inspection is not possible without removing the cover.

The favorable growers' experience and the quality of plants produced with the use of Microfoam blanket has outweighed any disadvantages. The keys to success are: 1. the initial bed preparation, 2. adequate drainage, 3. fungicide treatment and 4. rodent control.