Pruning Landscape Plants

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There are several types of pruning that can be tackled right now.

For summer blooms we utilize a number of semi-tropical and native plants that are root hardy but the tops freeze back. The list includes esperanza, poinciana, duranta, firebush, thryallis, lantanas, the summer salvias, milkweed, and mistflower. The easiest, and usually the most suitable way, to deal with them is to cut the tops back to ground level. The tops usually freeze back completely but that isn't always the case. Sometimes plants in relatively sheltered locations in the landscape can have a portion of the top that does not freeze back. If you only prune off the frozen portion of the top, your plant for the next summer may produce a larger plant. In my experience duranta and thryallis are the plants on this list that are most cold tolerant and may not have completely frozen back.

Another category of plants that will require some type of pruning is the citrus. Depending on the species, none or a considerable portion of the top may have been injured by the record setting cold temperatures in mid-November. Mexican limes and lemons are the species most likely to have freeze damage. Avocados, grapefruit, and even some oranges and satsumas also experienced damage. The goal is to identify the border between the uninjured wood and the killed wood. The dead-area of the stems are then cut off on the live-wood side of the border.

The live wood is usually recognizable because leaf and, even, bloom buds will be opening on the live side of the border. Unfortunately, the division between damaged and undamaged wood is not absolute at this time. A stem with partial damage can completely die later in the season as the plant is faced with hot temperatures. Be patient and recognize that further damage may be expressed later. In addition to citrus, it is common for dwarf pittosporum, oleander and other shrubs to express delayed freeze damage.

In severe cases of freeze damage, the entire top of a citrus will be killed back. If the plant is one that is grown on its own rootstock, it will probably resprout from the roots and may eventually get back in production. Some selections, however, are grown on hardy rootstocks. If that top is killed, the new sprout will be a plant such as sour orange that is heavy on thorns and sour fruit that never seems to ripen. If you end up with such a plant, the best then is usually to replace it.

The cold weather often damages the categories of plants described above, but in the case of peaches, plums, apples, and pears varying amounts of cold weather are necessary for them to bloom and produce fruit. The amount of cold weather, usually between 32 and 45 degrees, required for growth of the listed fruit trees is called its "required chill hours". We prune these plants now, not to remove freeze-killed wood, but to maximize high quality fruit production.

The basic pruning activity for these trees is designed to open-up the middle of the tree for air movement and sun penetration, and to improve the tree structure to prevent breakage from excessive fruit on stems while preserving the new (or old) wood that is necessary to bear fruit.

The pruning for each fruit species is different and the easiest way to accomplish good pruning results is to work from diagrams. The diagrams for the recommended pruning on each of the fruit species is available on plantanswers.com.

Roses are a fourth category of plants that are pruned now. They don't usually require a certain number of chill hours, but the technique and goals for pruning roses are similar to those of fruit tree pruning, especially peaches. Visit plantanswers.com for diagrams and instructions for rose pruning.