

Freeze Damage and Pruning

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With several hard freezes already we are having a real winter this year. Freezes are good and bad. They can reduce insect populations and set back invasive weeds like cat's claw but they also injure plants that are useful but cold-sensitive.

Citrus plantings received varying levels of damage. If you did not cover Mexican limes or Meyer lemons the entire top could be killed. Even with a covering, limes will be damaged if there was no heat source under the covering. In my landscape even grapefruit and satsumas were defoliated. The best strategy with citrus and most cold sensitive plants is to wait and see the full extent of the damage before you cut off too much wood. The "waiting" also takes into account that we are likely to have another freeze before early March when our last frost date occurs.

In March the new buds from unfrozen wood will emerge and it will be clear where the line between killed and live wood exists. If the root system is intact and some wood above the graft is still alive, limes and lemons will quickly produce a new crown.

For the first time in several years most of the tops of lantanas, duranta, esperanza, firebush, poinciana, salvia and other root hardy, heat-loving plants will be frozen back to the ground. They can be cut back anytime but it is a benefit to the wintering birds if the tops are left in place until early March.

In the flower garden the hard freezes generally killed back the petunias and begonias. Sweet peas, dianthus, calendula, and stocks also froze back in many gardens. Sweet peas can be replanted by seed. Pansies seemed to survive the freeze with bloom intact. There was some damage to snapdragons but it is normal for them to take a pause from blooming this time of the winter. If foliage survived they should begin a second bloom period in March.

Cyclamen and primula did not fare well. If you covered them the foliage may have survived but the blooms were knocked off by the cold. If the plants were not covered the usually cold-tolerant foliage may also have been destroyed. For some gardens it may be worth it to replant. We have at least 3 more months of bloom period.

Even the cold hardy vegetables were affected by the freezes. Onions, spinach, turnips, rutabagas, cabbage, and Brussels sprouts seemed to survive with minimal damage. The tops of lettuce, carrots, chard, and beets froze but should grow back. Replant English peas with seed if they froze back completely. If some foliage survived the plants will refoliate quickly.

The freeze damage and cold weather makes us pause in our gardening tasks, but now is a busy time. Fruit trees need to be pruned. Visit plantanswers.com for instructions and diagrams. It is a good time to plant shade trees and shrubs. The selection of shade trees is good at area nurseries and the CPS shade tree rebate is still available. It is too early to fertilize the lawn but it is a good time to aerate and top dress. In the vegetable garden plant potatoes and give the onions and other greens another side dressing of slow release lawn fertilizer.

For more information on gardening topics I will be speaking at the Phil Hardberger Center 8400 NW Military on “Attracting Birds to the Garden” at 9:45 am this morning, Feb-4-2017.