**Freeze Protection, It Is Time**

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It has been a mild winter so far, but it is time to move some plants to shelter and prepare to protect others.

Despite the fact that my bouganvillas are still blooming strongly, I am going to move them to shelter this weekend.

Bouganvillas quit blooming when we have a few days near 40 degrees and are damaged with temperatures at 32 degrees. They need to be protected from freezing temperatures, but they do not need to have light all winter. They do perfectly well piled-up in the corner of a garage of shed as long as it never falls below 32 degrees in the building.

Bouganvillas are easier to store if you cut them back to a relatively compact crown because the thorny branches seem to reach out and grab anybody who walks close to them.

Plumeria can be stored in the same conditions as bouganvilla—in a dark environment—but mandevilla, oriental hibiscus, geraniums and other cold-sensitive containers plants require light and cold protection if they are going to survive the winter. A greenhouse is ideal. A glassed-in sun porch also works. Some gardeners place them in a sheltered location on the south or east side of the house and then rely on applying a cloth or canvas cover when cold temperatures are forecast.

If your vegetable garden is doing as well as mine this winter, you still have tomatoes providing fruit. Quite often you can protect the plants from the first forecast freeze with a covering over the cage and then expect 3-4 weeks of mild weather. Since it is already mid-December and we have been harvesting tomatoes for a month, I am just going to pick all full-sized fruit before the first forecast freeze and end production.

If you would prefer to cover the plants, have enough agricultural fiber (insulate and others) or blankets ready to drape over the cages on the evening that the freeze (or near-freeze) is forecast.

Plastic is good for protection from cold winds, but it does not work well when the plastic touches the plant. If plastic is used, use a layer of cloth between the plant and the plastic or use a frame to form a tent so that air insulates the plant from contact with the plastic. Once the sun comes out, the plastic tent must be opened so that the tomatoes are not overheated.

If you want a freeze protection material that has the good characteristics of cloth and plastic, check out the new “Plankets.” It is a plasticized fabric that is effective and easy to use. Plankets are available in rectangle or round shapes.

In the landscape, citrus needs cold protection depending on how cold it gets and for how long. Kumquats, calomondin, changsha tangerine and satsumas have more cold tolerance than oranges, grapefruit, lemons and lime. I don’t cover my calomondin in the ground, but cover the rest of the citrus whenever the forecast is for temperatures below 26 degrees. Changsha tangerine kumquats and satsumas, especially the Orange Frost selection, can usually tolerate 24 degrees, but it is easier to be safe than sorry.

If temperatures fall below 24 degreesor it is expected to be below 28 degreesfor more than 2 or 3 hours, it is advisable to put a heat source under the freeze-covered plant. That means extending an outdoor-rated extension cord from the power source and attaching a poultry heat lamp, mechanics light or even a string of holiday lights to keep temperatures under the fabric close to freezing.

The round shaped Plankets work well for citrus growing in containers.

My radio colleague, Jerry Parsons, and I have disputed the cold tolerance of cyclamen. These discussions have resulted in us agreeing that the foliage is very tough but the blooms can be knocked off by freezing temperatures. The best strategy seems to be to cover the plants whenever the temperatures are forecasted to fall below 30 degrees. A strip of insulate, blanket or “Planket” laid over the top of the plant will do the job. The same treatment will work for petunias, snapdragons, dianthus and calendula. Pansies are the most cold hardy winter bloomer and do not need covering.