The Freezes are Coming

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As we near Christmas it is hard to believe that we have not had a hard freeze yet. Climate Change or not, we can expect freezing temperatures any time now.

In terms of our plants’ ability to tolerate freezing temperatures, there is an advantage when the landscape experiences several periods of temperatures in the 30s and 40s before they must face a freeze. Well adapted plants adjust their chemistry and growth activity to prepare themselves for the freeze. The process is called hardening-off.

Sub-tropical and tropical plants do not have the same capability to tolerate freezing temperatures. Protect bougainvillea, plumeria, oriental hibiscus, mandevilla and other cold sensitive plants by moving them into a freeze proof shelter such as a greenhouse or closed in sun porch. Some gardeners move them to a sheltered location next to a building and then drag them into the garage every time there is a period of freezing temps.

For larger cold sensitive plants such as citrus and avocados you must be prepared to cover them with fabric or blankets when freezes are forecast. The degree of need depends on the temperature and the length of time when temperatures will be below freezing.

Use a blanket or other fabric material to temporarily cover the plant. Plastic adds cold protection when it is used as a second layer over the cloth, but does not work well when the plastic touches the foliage. Another issue with plastic is that there can be a “greenhouse effect” where the area under the plastic heats up high enough to damage the plant. If plastic is used the resultant structure must be opened up before the sun bakes the plants inside.

One recommendation is to cover Mexican limes, lemons, and avocados when temperatures of 29 degrees F or less are forecast. Other less-sensitive citrus can be covered at 27 degrees. Calamundin, kumquats, Changsha tangerines and the “Frost” series of satsumas are the most cold tolerant citrus varieties. Provide a heat source to protect plants at temperatures under 24 degrees. Mechanic’s lights and poultry heat lamps work well as heat sources.

Cool weather vegetables and flowers are generally not covered in freezing temperatures. They have good cold tolerance. Snapdragons and petunias will often quit blooming after a cold spell in January and resume again in late February but it is not common to cover them. One exception I make is to protect cyclamen with a light agricultural fabric for temperatures below 30F. The foliage is tolerant of freezing temps but the blooms will sometimes be knocked off cold weather. If the freeze also injures the emerging flower buds, it can be a long wait before new flowers emerge.