

Freeze Protection, It Is Time
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Did you take the cold weather serious last week? It was the normal time to expect our first freeze of the year, but I got the impression from area gardeners that the forecast did not mobilize as much action as we would expect.

On most sites, temps did not fall below 32 degrees, but it stayed at 32 degrees for several hours. It was cold enough to freeze the bird baths and damage the foliage and blooms of tomatoes, zinnias, and coral vine. If you didn't put the bougainvillea, hibiscus and other containerized tropical plants in shelter they probably lost their blooms and some of their leaves. Readers in the Hill Country had temperatures that were cold enough to defoliate Frolimes

Maybe part of our inclination to ignore the cold warnings last week was because we did not have any fall tomatoes to worry about? The long hot, dry spell this summer means our plants do not have green fruit that needs to be protected. If you are like me, you haven't abandoned the plants, but they weren't worthy of trying to protect them from the cold. Well, now it is time to pull the damaged plants from the garden. Use the newly available space for spinach or onions. English peas are also a good choice, line up the tomato cages to provide the necessary trellis for the peas. It is also time to get serious about preparing for winter conditions, the next freeze will do more than freeze the bird baths for a few hours!

Bougainvillea 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 or shed if it never falls below 32 degrees in the building. Tropical hibiscus and most of the other cold sensitive plants in containers do require light in addition to above freezing temperatures in their storage situation. 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.

In the flower garden cyclamen has hardy foliage but the blooms can be knocked off by freezing temperatures. The best strategy with the plant seems to be to cover them whenever the temperatures are forecast 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 sometimes works for petunias, snapdragons, stocks, dianthus and calendula but usually we don't cover them and experience a winter pause in their bloom period. Pansies are the most cold hardy winter bloomer and do not need covering.

Backyard citrus needs cold protection depending on how cold it gets and for how long it stays cold. Kumquats, calamondin, Changsha tangerine and satsumas have the most cold tolerance. Lemons and lime are especially vulnerable to freezing temperatures. I cover the citrus whenever the forecast is for temperatures below 28 degrees. Changsha tangerine, kumquats, and satsumas can usually tolerate 26 degrees, but it is easier to be safe than sorry.

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 plants inside are not over heated.

If you want a freeze protection material that has the good characteristics of cloth and plastic, check out "Plankets." It is a plasticized fabric that is easy to use. Don't over-estimate its protective power, however. In my experience, they protect about as well as a sheet or thin blanket. Plankets are available in rectangle or round shapes.

If temperatures fall below 26 degrees or it is expected to be below 28 degrees for more than 4 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 or mechanic's light. Make sure the light bulb is not a LID version. They do not provide the desirable heat with the light.