

Friday's Feature

By

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Don't be too quick to prune freeze-damaged plants

Despite the fact that many people think of Florida as tropical, Northwest Florida does experience freezes. And as a result, we are likely to see the less cold hardy tropical and subtropical landscape plants injured during a cold snap.

Unfortunately, many cold sensitive plants were damaged by recent freezes along the Gulf Coast. I have seen badly damaged hibiscus, ixora, crotons, firebush, bananas, tibouchina and many others. The question now is what to do with these freeze-damaged plants.

Of course due to the unsightliness, one of the first things you may think of is taking out the pruning shears and cutting away the ugly dead or dying leaves and branches. The general recommendation, however, is to delay pruning until warm weather returns and the plant begins to put out new growth. This recommendation is based on several factors.

First, with most ornamental plants you really can't tell how much damage has been done by a freeze until the plant puts out new growth in the spring. By pruning now, you may cut off live wood that doesn't have to be lost.

Secondly, the leaves and branches, which have already been killed by the cold, can help protect the parts of your plant that haven't been damaged. The dead plant material is natural insulation. If you cut this away, later freezes will do more damage than would have been done if the dead parts had been left on the plant.

And the last reason not to prune cold-damaged plants is that pruning by its nature encourages new growth on plants. Pruning, especially when followed by unseasonably warm weather, will force new growth. This new tender growth is much more susceptible to cold and wind damage.

If you are determined to prune now for some reason, remember to cover whatever remains of your plant to protect it when freezing weather is predicted.

When additional cold weather comes our way again, here are a few tips to help your landscape plants survive.

- Water your landscape plants a day or so before a freeze. A well watered soil will absorb more solar

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heat and release that heat during the night.

- Apply organic mulch. Mulch will help to hold solar heat and moderate soil temperatures.
- Use covers on valuable plants. Covers should extend to the ground to trap the heat from the soil. On very cold nights place a heat source, such as Christmas lights, under the cover.
- Do not fertilize cold damaged plants. Now is not the time to stimulate new growth.

Remember we may see additional freezes before it's all over. Protect what you can when needed. And don't be too quick to dig up and remove tropical plants that have been severely damaged and appear to be dead. They may eventually sprout again from the base of the plant or the roots in April or May.

And finally, if you lose one or two plants, just see it as an opportunity to add something new to your landscape. With thousands of plants to choose from and mild weather most of the year, who could complain?

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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