

Friday's Feature

By

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### **Quick cool down could be disastrous for the landscape**

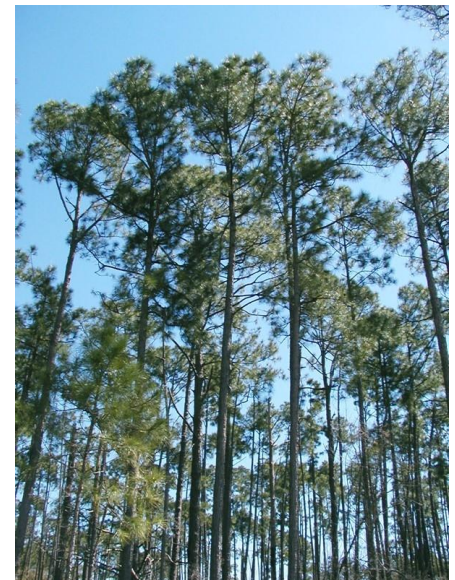
Early, record-setting cold in the west this year reminds us that cooler weather is not far away. October has been unusually hot and humid. A quick cool-down will come as a shock to many plants. Proper planning and care can make the difference between life and death in your landscape.

Preparing your plants for winter is not a quick process. Gardeners should strive to keep landscape plants healthy year round. Avoid letting plants become weakened from improper watering, fertilizing or pruning practices. When plants are weakened, they are less likely to survive the winter months.

It is best to avoid using a nitrogen fertilizer in the late fall or during winter. Don't fertilize cold-sensitive plants any later than September. If you do, they will add new growth, which is especially susceptible to cold injury. Because pruning will also cause plants to produce new growth, it is best to avoid pruning most trees and shrubs during the fall. Usually a few weeks after pruning, a plant will begin producing new growth. This new growth is subject to cold injury.

October is the month that pine trees start dropping their needles and some trees will start dropping their leaves. It is best to clear the lawn of this leaf litter. Leaves capture moisture between themselves and the turf that may create insect and disease problems. Once raked up, you can always use the leaves or needles as mulch in the shrub or flower beds. Two to three inches of mulch over the plant's roots will also help prepare your plants for cold weather.

For container-grown tropical plants or house plants outside for the summer, it is important to start acclimating them for a move inside. Research done in Florida in the late 1970's revealed an interesting phenomenon. Tropical plants grown in full sun have leaves (called sun leaves) which are structurally different from the leaves of plants grown in shade (shade leaves). Sun leaves have fewer chloroplasts and thus less chlorophyll. Shade leaves have greater numbers of chloroplasts and thus more chlorophyll. Shade leaves are thin, large and few in number.



When plants are grown in strong light they develop sun leaves which are photosynthetically very inefficient. If these same plants are placed in low light, they must either remake existing sun leaves or drop their sun leaves and grow a new set of shade leaves which are photosynthetically more efficient.

To reduce the shock which occurs when a plant with sun leaves is placed in shade, gradually reduce its light exposure. This process is called acclimatization. Gardeners should acclimatize plants when placing them outdoors in summer by gradually increasing light intensities and reversing the process before plants are brought indoors in the fall.

Proper care throughout the year will give your plants an edge in cold weather. Plants tolerate cold temperatures better and recover from injury faster when they are healthy. If your plants are damaged by the cold, don't be too hasty to prune away the damage -- just wait for spring!

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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