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**RELEASE DATE: January 12, 2017**

**HOW TO HELP PLANTS**

**BEFORE AND AFTER A FREEZE**

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The recent two-night freeze killed a lot of plants and injured many others. Cold temperatures can damage the entire plant, or parts such as leaves, buds, flowers, trunks, stems or roots.

People may be anxious to get outside and prune off the now unattractive parts of plants, but be patient, at least until February 15, our last frost date! It is better to wait until the weather warms up and all chance of a freeze is past for the season.

The exception to this is plants that are not woody and have tissue that has turned mushy. Remove it within a couple of weeks to prevent pathogens that might have entered through the damaged tissue from moving toward the center of the plant. Cut off anything that’s mushy, and be sure to dip your pruners in rubbing alcohol for 30 seconds between cuts to keep from spreading potential pathogens to other plants or plant parts.

There are a few reasons for waiting to prune anything woody; pruning now may stimulate new growth that would be very susceptible to damage if we get some more cold weather as predicted, and it is difficult to tell right now whether branches are dead or have just lost leaves; many may surprise you by pushing out some new shoots. Often the tip of a branch is killed but the rest is fine. You wouldn’t want to cut off live branches or twigs. Also, outer branches, even if they are dead, may provide some wind protection to inner branches.

There’s no reason to rush anyway as it doesn’t help the plant to prune off dead wood at this point. When things warm up and new buds form and develop into leaves, it will become obvious where to make pruning cuts to remove dead sections. Keep in mind that some plants will die back to the ground but will put out new shoots in the spring, so be patient.

The other unfortunate side of the freeze is that some damage will be internal, and not be visible or cause any problems for several months. Injury to roots, which have little ability to develop cold tolerance and are particularly susceptible if the plant is growing in a pot, also often won’t show up until a very warm day when the reduced root system just can’t provide enough water to the plant.

Freezing temperatures can also damage the water moving system inside tree trunks, limiting the water moved up the trunk to the leaves. Many broadleaf trees can grow new conducting tissue, but due to their very different structure, palms cannot. Again, the problem may not be visible until the first hot day when the fronds all wilt severely.

Palm leaf buds deep in the plant may have been damaged by the frigid weather but the signs won’t show up until the bud develops and emerges brown, partially brown or deformed. Fortunately, the leaves will often grow out of the injury.

Any stress to plants, including freezing temperatures, excessive water, drought, and improper or overly-enthusiastic pruning, weakens plants making them susceptible to diseases and insect infestations that wouldn’t harm a healthy plant. Any damage, which could include pruning cuts, provides an entry point to pathogens that might not normally bother the plant.

Keep an eye on your plants as the weather warms up, watching for any signs of disease. If something develops on a few leaves or twigs, you can probably just prune it off. Be sure to disinfect your clippers after making each cut.

The weather forecasters are predicting another freeze at the end of the month, so get ready. As soon as you hear that very cold weather is on its way, water all your plants thoroughly since moist soil will hold more heat than dry soil that has more air spaces.

If old man weather sends another freeze, you may want to cover your plants, especially tropicals and other exotics, or any other plants not native to the area. Use large cardboard boxes, bed sheets, blankets, plastic sheeting, or anything similar. The essential thing is to trap some heat from the ground under the covering by making sure it goes all the way to the ground and is anchored with bricks, rocks or other heavy things. The more ground that is included under the cover, the better chance the plant has. Just wrapping a covering around a plant doesn’t protect it, except from drying winds, since the plant is not producing heat. Some people put outdoor Christmas lights, or jugs filled with water under the cover for an additional source of some heat. Be sure the cover is not in contact with any lights.

Don’t worry too much about the cover touching the plant; although a few leaves that are touching it may be damaged, most of the plant will not be. More fragile plants (if they are the “right” size) can have a tomato cage pushed into the ground over them, to keep the covering material off them.

You probably lack the time, energy, or sheets to cover all your tender plants. Some will die back to the ground and then regrow next spring; others will be lost to a hard freeze. But, look at the bright side-this will give you a chance to try some new plants in your yard. Watch for the Master Gardeners huge Spring Plant Sale on March 4, and sales at local nurseries.

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