

## After the Bleak Midwinter: A Guide to Surviving the Freeze by Kate Feuille, El Paso Master Gardener

What doesn't kill us makes us stronger, what doesn't kill us makes us stronger. This was my mantra as I wandered around my forlorn garden after February's Arctic storm. My brief foray out-of-doors had me feeling as depressed as my withered brown rosemary and yellow-leaved roses look. Researching the plants online furthered my downward spiral, as I discovered that one after another, my carefully selected native plants may not survive.

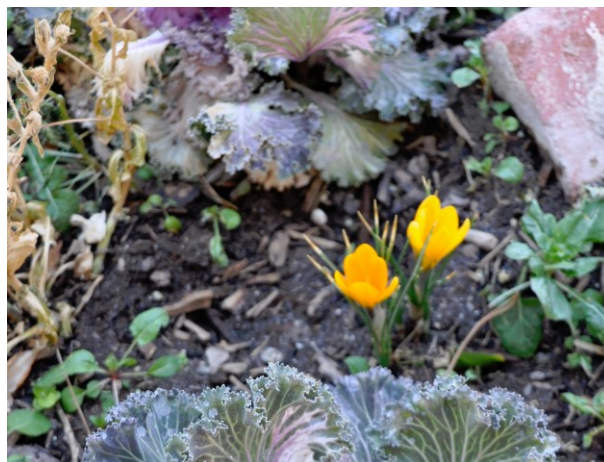
Not only did our temperatures dip significantly below our usual low, they did so for nearly 72 hours. The cold winds that blew through El Paso exacerbated the temperature loss and damage potential for plants. So what are we to do?

In this case it seems the best way to deal with the problem -- for now -- is to ignore it. By that I mean don't rush out there and hack away at the damaged plants. Do not prune until the danger of frost has passed. For El Paso that can be as late as mid-April. Pruning earlier places plants at risk for new growth that is more susceptible to damage should the temperatures warm and cool again. Additionally, it is exceedingly difficult to determine how damaged your plants are. Severely damaged plants will take longer to bud out. The extent of the freeze damage may not make itself known for months -- or years.

So, while we wait for the end of winter, take time to educate yourself on what to do to protect your plants now, and in the future.

### For now:

- Watering cold-damaged plants that appear wilted will not help to revive them.
- If you must prune, remove only soft or mushy freeze-damaged plant matter from nonwoody plants.
- Do not prune if you wish to attract wildlife. Freeze-damaged foliage and stems are useful to songbirds, insects and other wildlife. Birds seeking food in the winter will find shelter in branches and stems.
- Continue to water as usual, increasing watering as temperatures rise. During winter trees and shrubs benefit from an occasional deep watering.
- Palms. As hard as it is, you will just have to wait it out. Several species cannot tolerate



*Crocus survived and blossomed after recent severe weather. Many bulbs do quite well even in extreme cold.*

prolonged freezing temperatures. Look at the recommended plant list for replacements if necessary.

- As temperatures warm up, remove mulch from around the plant's crown to allow warmth and light to penetrate.

### **Later:**

- Pay attention to what you buy -- that tropical plant that you fall in love with will only break your heart come one nasty winter. Read labels! El Paso is generally USDA zone 8, meaning plants need to be cold hardy to 15 degrees.
- Resist the urge to prune in late summer. I know we're bored with weeding, and zoning out with a pair of clippers is ever so relaxing, but pruning encourages that which is most susceptible to freeze damage -- tender new shoots. Don't risk it! Particularly with borderline-hardy plants. The "dead" wood will protect that plant from harsh cold.
- Gradually decrease your watering as temperatures drop in fall. This will harden your plants, protecting them from freezing temperatures.
- Do not apply fertilizer after August 1.
- Remember the old adage about the best time to plant a tree: twenty years ago. Established plants will fare better in a freeze. If this really was a 30-year freeze, this spring and fall will be a great time to plant.

### **Next time a north wind blows:**

- It does help to water plants, especially those in containers, before a freeze.
- Mulching and covering plants with a light blanket helps as well, but you must remove the cover when the temperatures rise.
- Vegetables and other tender plants can be protected with cold frames, hoop houses, hot-caps or water storage devices over and around plants. These should not touch the plants.

The good news is that healthy, established plants *are* likely to survive. And just think of the blank slate that awaits your trowel when you are ready to plant again this spring.

Check out these websites for more information on plant hardiness:

<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/ornamentals/natives/indexcommon.htm>

<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/ornamentals/elpasoplants/lowwatertrees.html>

Sources:

[http://blogs.chron.com/houstongrows/2011/02/all\\_s\\_not\\_lost\\_after\\_the\\_big\\_freeze.html](http://blogs.chron.com/houstongrows/2011/02/all_s_not_lost_after_the_big_freeze.html)

<http://www.theeagle.com/gardening/Hold-off-on-pruning-freeze-damaged-plants>

Morris, Robert *Freeze Damage to Plants in Lower Elevations of Southern Nevada* Cooperative Extension, Mohave County.

<http://www.unce.unr.edu/publications/files/ho/2007/sp0718.pdf>

Reddick, Linda *Identification and Prevention of Frost or Freeze Damage* University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, Special publication 07-18.

[http://cals.arizona.edu/mohave/master\\_gardeners/kingman/articles/frostorfreeze.pdf](http://cals.arizona.edu/mohave/master_gardeners/kingman/articles/frostorfreeze.pdf)