

Hold off on pruning freeze-damaged plants

By CHARLA ANTHONY
charla.anthony@theeagle.com

When a hard freeze hits with a strong wind and lasts for days, there is generally little we can do to protect the plants in our landscapes and gardens.

Gardeners head out with sheets, blankets, boxes, plastic and anything else they can use to wrap up plants for a cold night when a freeze is forecast. However, even these protective measures are ineffective when freezing or below freezing temperatures extend for days.

Freezes kill plant tissue

The signs of cold damage can be confusing, since some damage may not be evident until months later. When the water inside a plant freezes, it expands and bursts cell walls. Plants then quickly turn dark brown or black and die.

Leaves and tender shoots can appear water-soaked and wilted. These tissues will usually turn black within a few hours or days. The tips of narrow-leaf evergreens, such as junipers, may turn uniformly brown. Broad-leaved evergreens, such as hollies, often have marginal leaf burn.

Only time will tell how much damage plants suffered in this big chill. While established plantings may have fared well, others did not. Injury to foliage and tender shoots should be visible within a few days, but it may be several months before damage to larger limbs can be determined.

How to care for plants after a big freeze

There is very little that can be done to revive plants suffering from the extreme effects of freezing. Watering cold-damaged plants that appear wilted will not help to revive them.

Do not be in a hurry to prune or remove your damaged plants. Some plants may appear dead, but they are not. Soft or mushy freeze-damaged plant material may be removed from non-woody plants.

The safest approach in pruning woody plants is to wait until just before growth begins in the spring. In the event of another freeze this year, the upper portions of freeze-damaged branches can insulate and protect lower areas that are still alive and will leaf out this spring. Wait to see if any live green foliage reappears or gently scrap under the outer layer of bark to see if green wood is present.

If you decide to prune, add 4 to 6 inches of mulch to protect the crowns, the area just a few inches above and below the soil level. This aids plants in surviving late winter or early spring "cold snaps."

(And don't be too quick to dig up and remove plants that have been severely damaged, even if they appear to be dead. New growth may still sprout from the crown or the roots once temperatures warm.)

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.

Our winter weather is erratic. A sunny warm spell may stimulate new growth from plants that are pruned after fall and winter freezes. This new growth is then susceptible to more severe damage as winter progresses.

Folks who prefer a tidy landscape and do not want any part of their yard to appear un-manicured may prefer a fast cut. Fill in empty spaces with bedding plants such as dianthus, alyssum, pansies, ornamental cabbage and snapdragons.

* Charla Anthony is the horticulture program assistant at Texas AgriLife Extension, Brazos County, 2619 Texas 21, Bryan, Texas 77803. Her e-mail address is charla.anthony@theeagle.com.