

THE WALTON COUNTY GARDENER

JANUARY 2023

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In this issue we address the freeze in December and how to care for the damage in your landscape.

Also included:

“Care of Freeze-Injured Citrus Trees”

Larry Williams, Okaloosa County Agent



We hope that this will give you some assurance that your plants may yet surprise you with a come back after this surprising freeze. This information should encourage you to be patient and too wait to see what your plants have to tell you about their own methods of recovery.

If you have more questions, attend the Walton County Master Garden Lecture Series, February 1, 2023 at 10:00 AM at our Coastal Branch, 770 Logan Lane, in Grayton Beach. Daniel Leonard, Extension Director and Agent, Calhoun County, will present “Don’t Panic: Caring for Freeze Damaged Landscapes” and will be available to answer any questions about the freeze.





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by Walton County Master Gardeners

January 2023

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THE BIG *FREEZE*



Gerber daisy

We had quite a bad spell of cold weather, didn't we? Here, in zone 9a, our coldest temperature was 22 F, for several days. What a horrible feeling to come out to the garden and see the devastation. But not ALL plants were affected. If you looked around in your garden you may have noticed that some plants weren't fazed by the low temperatures because they are NATIVES. If nothing convinced you before our recent cold spell that should convince you now. Look around and you'll find that our natives were nonplussed about the cold. For example, *Sabal* palms weren't effected, while *Royal* palms were hit *hard*. (Although *Sabal* palms are not indigenous to our area, they are still considered native). *Pindo* palms faired a little bit better than *Royals*. Wax myrtle just chuckled at the cold, while the Mexican firebush turned completely brown and looks dead (but isn't).

Before you get your pruners, hedge clippers, loppers or axes out, take a deep breath and wait. Yes, wait. Many of our plants look horrible and looking at them is somewhat depressing with their brown leaves, or growth that looks dead. Why wait? Just because your plant looks dead, doesn't mean it is (the gerber daisy, above, flowered just two weeks after the frost). Many plants have set bud for this spring's emergence. Removing the dead leaves may damage that bud and could

delay the emergence of the new bud in the spring. With palms, any green remaining on the fronds is desperately needed as it contains nitrogen, an element that is key to palms' survival.

One more thing to remember is that up until that cold spell, we had warmer-than-normal temperatures. The soil was still quite warm, which protected the roots, keeping them cozy in the ground. The reason for the death of my Mexican fire bush is that it is tropical and not native in our zone. It could not handle the cold at all - doesn't like to be below 40, but I usually plant it as an annual - it is quite affordable.

BEING PREPARED FOR THE NEXT FREEZE

- ***Don't cover your plants until just before dusk.*** Give your plant all the warmth of the sun before you cover - usually the entire day.

- ***Water plants thoroughly.*** Many times, especially here in Florida, wind will accompany the chilly temps. Although plants don't feel wind chill (they don't have blood), the wind will dry out the plant making it prone to failure.

- ***Using proper coverings.*** While old sheets and blankets may seem to help, in reality it is not enough when the temperatures dip below the freezing mark as low as it did. Frost cloths or frost blankets are recommended. They not only keep the frost off your plants they also keeps the plant a little warmer than the air. I used frost cloths on my succulents but only sheets on my containers. Succulents survived without any issues, while my containers were not so lucky. Although I didn't pull wilted plants from them, I cut them back hoping for their recovery. Sheets just did not keep out the chill. A good supply of frost cloths and blankets can be found on Amazon.

DAMAGE CONTROL

LAWNS - Frost is nothing more than frozen dew that crystallizes on the grass. Grass blades freeze very easily because they are 90% water, so when frozen the normally pliable grass becomes rigid and inflexible. Therefore, the simple act of walking on frosted grass causes it to break and rupture; future regrowth of the grass blade is significantly hindered. Damage is not apparent for a few days. These are actual footprints of dead grass.



PERENNIALS - I like to keep my perennial foliage and spent blooms through the fall and early winter because this plant material will harbor many beneficial insects and gives birds additional food with the seeds that are still available. After the freeze, what wasn't fading, is now. I will give my perennials another week before I start pruning them back. This is 'Whirling Butterflies' (gaura). Note the new growth already emerging.





PALMS - As I mentioned above, nitrogen is key to palms' survival, whether it be in the winter or during the growing season. Although the fronds look brown, they still can offer some nutrient to the palm, vital in that they have been put under a tremendous amount of stress. Also another benefit to the brown fronds is that they insulate the new growth that may want to emerge.

I always cringe when I see piles of green fronds at the roadside to be picked up for disposal. Although the palm may not die, it is not thriving either.

SHRUBS - Resist the urge to prune. One hazard with premature pruning is that you may initiate new growth which is tender and could be killed if we have another freeze; another is buds for this year's growth have even formed and you risk a delay in the growth.



SO WHAT CAN BE DONE NOW?

The following can be cut back now:

- Firespike to ground level
- Firebush to ground,
- Ferns, including Fox tail and Holly ferns
- Shell Ginger to ground level
- African Iris to ground level
- Duranta to 2 feet above ground
- Turk's Cap Hibiscus to ground level

Other gardening chores

- remove dead fronds on Pygmy Date
 - remove agapanthus foliage
 - trim back crinum - you may already see new growth emerging
 - remove Bird of Paradise leaves
 - remove Selloum Leaf Philodendron foliage only
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- Leave Confederate Jasmine alone until Spring

WINTER ANNUALS

Certain annuals are grown this time of year because they can withstand colder temperatures. However, our temperatures were a bit extreme even for them. Most of mine survived, probably because they are in containers and I covered them or moved them to a protected area.

Annuals that do well this time of year and can handle a little frost (like the week after New Year's):

Violas and Pansies - they just laugh at the cold, that's what make them so inviting! Be careful with overwatering as pansies can rot. They faired very well in our freeze.



Snapdragons - My snapdragons did not survive. Mine were in the ground and although they looked fine after the frost, they eventually succumb. Instead of pulling, I am going to just cut off the dead foliage and spent flowers. We shall see how they do.

Supertunias - Although they were in flower and the flowers got nipped, most of mine survived. I have one that has a lot of dead stems and wilted foliage, which I cut back. It is IMPORTANT THAT YOU REMOVE ANY DEAD PLANT MATERIAL. The weather has warmed up and I have seen insects come alive - dead material on your annuals is an invitation to them and the disease they may carry.

**ALL THE PLANTS ABOVE WERE COVERED WITH BED SHEETS -
LESSON LEARNED**

Care of Freeze-Injured Citrus Trees

Cold injured citrus trees can take a while to become evident. What appears to be damage will not always be permanent. Never be in a hurry to remove cold injured tissue from a citrus tree. Citrus, especially Satsuma, can be very resilient and will often resprout on injured tissue. Pruning before this can happen can remove fruit producing branches.

Leaves on a freeze-damaged citrus tree will be hard and brittle. If freeze damage is severe, the leaves will collapse, dry out and fall from the tree. It's normal for leaves to take on a wilted or drooping appearance during periods of low temperatures. Don't confuse this with freeze damage. Frozen leaves will not be wilted – they will be hard and brittle.

Freeze damage can also cause the trunk and larger branches to split and the bark to become loose. Twigs and branches may continue to die for up to two years following a severe freeze.

Unless the soil becomes dry, be careful to not water cold injured citrus trees during warm periods that often follow freezes. This will delay the tree's growth and keep the tree in a more dormant state. Later on, if you see that the damaged tree is putting on new growth, it's okay to give it a little water.

Delay pruning of damaged limbs until late spring or summer because it's difficult to determine the extent of damage until spring growth takes place. Pruning also may encourage new tender growth during the cold season.