

The big freeze – how to help your plants stay alive
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If you're like me, you love your gardens and hate what the freezing cold weather does to them. There are some ways you can help to protect your plants though. Even if your plants have suffered severe damage from the frost, don't fret, there are steps you can take to help mend them and most of the time they will sprout new growth in the spring.

One of the best ways to protect your plants from freezes is to mulch them. Mulching protects plant roots. Bark, straw, sawdust, peat moss, leaves and grass clippings are the most common materials used for mulch. As a general rule, mulch should be about 2 inches deep. Around trees and shrubs, the mulch should be scraped away from the trunk or main stems.

It is critical to check and make sure your plants are getting enough moisture. Every once in a while it is important to check your mulch and make sure that moisture is getting to the soil below. Especially in the cold winter months, the soil may dry out in certain areas. The combination of dry soil and cold temperatures can cause serious freeze damage to garden trees and shrubs.

With some plants, covering is really the only way to protect them. Delicate species such as broadleaf evergreen shrubs and some flowering plants may require a bit of extra care to make it through the colder temperatures. Make sure when covering your plants, you use some type of cloth material. If polyethylene is used, it cuts off air to the plant and acts as a greenhouse for the vegetation underneath it. This causes the plant to go from cold lows at night to warmer highs in the day in a short period of time. This rapid temperature change can be fatal to plants. If you do use plastic, make sure it is vented and removed when the sun comes out during the day. Whatever material is used, always remove the coverings after the cold weather has passed.

Some plants may require a bit of special care. Those plants that are in containers may need to be brought in from the cold. If you have a porch or garage that can be utilized until the cold snap passes, it could certainly save their lives. You don't necessarily need to put them in a heated area as this may be too drastic a change in temperature. Just remember when plants in containers are exposed to the freezing temperatures, they are receiving icy blasts from all four sides with little protection. They also get the cold from top to bottom so it is quite easy for them to freeze.

Perennials and summer annuals, which are very delicate, may be covered with an inch of straw or hay during the cold winter.

The best way to keep your yard looking its best all year round is to plant only varieties of plants that are hardy to this area. If you absolutely must have delicate plants, plant them in the highest part of the yard. Cold air settles to the lowest parts. Make sure to protect your plants from the wind. Large trees, fences and hedges can give great protection to the more delicate species.

Remember when placing plants in the garden in the spring, think ahead to how the weather will affect them in their location. Place them in an area that is best for their survival in freezing temperatures. Plants that freeze slowly then thaw slowly have the least amount of damage.

Putting a delicate plant where there is no shelter, shade and too much sun may be its death sentence.

If your plants have already suffered damage, try not to fret. Often times, plants will come back beautifully in the spring. Some that you are certain are completely dead will begin to send up green shoots soon enough. There are some steps you can take to help them out though.

Don't be in a hurry to prune. It is hard to look at those ugly, dead looking branches, but delay hard pruning on woody plants until new growth begins in the spring, then you can accurately determine which parts are alive and which are dead. Don't be too quick to dig up and remove plants that appear to be dead. They may eventually resprout from the roots in April or May.

After a freeze is over, check the water needs of plants in containers and in the ground. Remove the covers and pull mulch back that completely covered low plants.

I hope your gardens survive the cold spells well, but even if your yard looks like the dead zone, don't worry spring will be here soon!