

Plant Freeze Protection

In the past week Central Florida has been experiencing low night time temperatures below 45 degrees Fahrenheit. Whenever there is a low temperature, people often place great concerns on protecting the three **Ps**, which are pipe, plants and pets. In this article we will discuss plant protection. The UF/IFAS Extension in Osceola has been receiving numerous phone calls from residents seeking information on how to protect their plants from freezing. Many of our plants in our area are tropical plants and were not designed to handle temperatures below 45 degrees Fahrenheit.

The first step in freeze protection is to keep plants well-watered. Frost injury occurs when ice crystals form on the leaf surface drawing moisture from the leaf tissue. The damage from this dehydration will be less severe if the plant is not drought-stressed. Cover plants during the low temperature and be sure to remove covering as the temperature increases, especially during the day time. You can use a blanket, paper, drop cloth, or a simple sheet to cover plants. Completely cover plants from the top all the way to the soil surface and do not allow any air to escape. It is important to note that plastic should not be used to cover plants. Plastic does not provide any insulation; if it gets in contact with plants it will cause cold injury. In addition, increase air circulation between plants if possible; this allows excess moisture to pass through and reduce the likelihood of frost damage.

Plants in containers can be placed in the house or other enclosed area. It is also important to note that there is a high probability that you will move outdoor insects inside when moving plants indoors. To reduce the risk of moving insects with plants, treat plants with an insecticide that is labeled for indoor use before transporting them inside. Western and southern exposures are often warmer than northern and eastern; move plants to western and southern areas of the landscape. For added protection, always remember not to fertilize plants with nitrogen in early fall; it will initiate new growth which will be susceptible to cold damage. Adding 3-4 inches of organic mulch around plant roots will keep roots warm during winter and keep adequate moisture around the roots.

Finally, do not prune frost damaged plants until they begin growing in the spring. Pruning encourages new shoot growth which will be injured by low temperatures. If plants are damaged, do not remove them from the landscape until spring arrives; during this time you will be certain if plants are still alive.

For more information on landscaping and other related horticulture topics, contact Grantly Ricketts with UF/IFAS Extension in Osceola County at 321-697-3000 or email gricketts@ufl.edu