HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

MANY PLANTS CAN HANDLE SLOW COOLING

The warm temperatures this past week have been delightful, especially after I just returned from the very frigid state of Pennsylvania. Traveling back to my home state during the Winter always reminds me of why I moved to Florida. However, we too have our fair share of cold weather. In fact we did a few weeks ago, and you may have noticed that some of the tender plants in the landscape experienced some cold damage.

Tropical, subtropical and even some temperate plants are sensitive to cold weather. This is especially true for tropical plants and summer annuals that can be injured by temperatures just below 50°F. Injury caused by cold temperatures can affect the entire plant or parts of the plant, such as the fruits, flowers, buds, leaves, trunks, stems or roots.

The ability of plants to withstand the cold depends on how great the temperature fluctuations are. If the temperature gradually decreases over a period of time, the plants are more likely to withstand the cold. This is because the plants are able to acclimate to cold weather over that time. Plants, however, can be greatly damaged if the temperature drops suddenly, because they'll have no time to acclimate to the freezing temperatures.

Plants are damaged when ice crystals form within the plant cells and in the spaces between the cells. The crystals expand, rupturing the cell walls and preventing the plants from maintaining any shape. If severe, this can kill tender plants. On hardier plants, damaged foliage will appear wilted and curl down. In a few hours or days, it will darken and turn black. On some plants, the leaves will turn a purplish color when damaged by cold. Flowers and buds may die, blacken and drop to the ground if exposed to cold temperatures. Damaged flowers will not develop into fruit. Young branches and new growth on plants may also blacken and die.

After freezing temperatures occur, you should remove damaged leaves and flowers as soon as they turn brown or black. This will help prevent diseases from attacking the plant. Pruning should be postponed until cold temperatures are no longer expected and new growth begins to appear on the plant. This is to make sure that live wood, which appears dead from losing its leaves, is not removed from the plant. Cold-damaged wood can be detected by examining the cambium layer (under the bark) of the plant. If it has black or brown discoloration, it is damaged and should be pruned back behind these points. Plants should be fertilized in the spring to encourage new growth.

More cold weather may be just around the corner. You can easily protect plants from severe freezes that may occur later this winter. Do this by moving potted plants indoors and covering tender landscape plants with a protective covering, such as sheets or cardboard. Be careful not to let the protective cover touch the plant or the cold can get through and damage it. It is also important to remove the cover the next day when temperatures rise, so the plants don't "bake." Plants placed near the house, lights or other structures that shelter them from wind will be more protected than those fully exposed to the cold air.

Tropical and subtropical plants can be used in Central Florida landscapes, but they must be protected during freezes or replaced after cold weather has ceased. A combination of tender and cold-pardy plants should be used in order to prevent total destruction of the landscape by cold temperatures.

For a list of cold-tolerant plants or for answers to other plant questions, contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners. They are available to take your calls Mondays through Fridays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Jennifer Welshans
Horticulture Agent
Osceola County Extension Service
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
321-697-3000
jwel2@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
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