

BEFORE A FREEZE

PHOTOS AND STORY By LORI MURRAY ★ CAMERON COUNTY MASTER GARDENER, TEXAS SUPERSTAR SPECIALIST

After listening to the weather report late in January you may have wondered what you could do to get your plants ready for the low temperatures forecast for that Friday night. Even colder temperatures were again forecast for the first week of February. Especially if you are a gardener new to South Texas, you knew you should do something with water, but maybe weren't sure just what – water before, water after, water early in the morning or late in the day? Thanks to a handout from Debbie Cox, I have some information to put you on the right road.

Freezes come in several categories. Temperatures between 32 and 29 degrees are defined as a light freeze; it can kill tender plants. Temperatures of 25 – 28 constitute a moderate to hard freeze which causes wide damage to most plants. Temperatures of 24 degrees and below are a severe, killing freeze; it causes heavy damage to most of our plants. Many plants can survive a brief frost, but very few can survive a severe freeze.

Protecting plants in the ground involves saving the roots, and a thick layer of mulch should be part of the yard work already done in the fall. Because drought stressed plants are very susceptible to cold damage, one of the best things you can do is to water them – ideally a few days before a cold snap. Watering the base (not the leaves) of your plants when you cover them right before the freeze creates a source of warmth that will slowly lose its heat over the course of the night but will provide some protection.

Plants in pots are more susceptible to the cold because their roots are above the ground and more exposed to cold air. In the case of a light freeze, moving them closer to the house and grouping them together can offer some protection – especially if you can put them on the south side of the house. Then you can add a heavy layer of either mulch or straw to the pots and cover them to help preserve their temperature. If a hard freeze is expected – or the freeze is supposed to last for several days like it did last February - you should move them inside the house or garage before the temperatures drop. Because I'm just getting too old to move pots over and over for any distance, I had a handyman put some hooks on the edge of the roof and now I hang tarps 8' wide and 11' long all around my covered patio enclosing it completely. (I got the tarps at Harbor Freight.) Since my patio is on the south side it was well protected. I moved everything in there last February and not only saved mature plants, but even some plants I was rooting.

Another thing to consider is that many of our tropical plants cannot survive temperatures below 40 degrees. Covering plants traps the heat from the soil and also keeps the cold air out. Be sure the covering's edge touches the ground on all sides and hold it down with bricks, sandbags, or other materials heavy enough to keep it from blowing off.

Because soil takes longer to freeze, its warmth keeps the plant warm. That's what makes covers effective and there are many types of covers that will protect your plants. Sheets and towels can be placed around the plant and then covered with plastic to trap the heat.

In this vein, here's A WORD ABOUT PLASTIC: Do not cover any plant with plastic unless you have something between the plastic and the leaves or you will damage the leaves and the plant itself. Placing plastic covering over another material is okay as it improves the insulation you've already provided. Cardboard boxes, large trash cans, or plastic tubs can be placed over any outdoor plants.

Over the years I've gathered a supply of old sheets and towels for exactly this purpose, but last year I hit on something new. I found plant covers in a Gardeners' Supply catalog and ordered the cheaper of the two kinds to test them out. The covers are 6' by 50' and will protect a plant down to 28 degrees. Yesterday I ordered again – the heavier cover this time – to protect my plants down to 24 degrees. If you go to www.gardeners.com you can find the lighter under "covers" but you have to use the words "frost covers" to see the heavier one. Now instead of having to wash and dry sheets and towels, I just fold the covers up after each cold spell and store them in my shed. An example of effectiveness: Last February I covered my hamelia hedge on the north side with the lighter weight cover and it came through unscathed. I didn't think our January cold last month warranted doing that and now my hamelia is nothing more than sticks!

Uncovering the plants as soon as the temperatures are going to remain above freezing is just as important as covering them when temperatures are going to be below freezing. And if your plants have been covered for several days, it's a good idea to water them when you uncover them. They're undoubtedly ready for a drink of water after a dry spell and they've worn their coverings quite a while. They need sunlight and fresh air. If you're feeling lazy, remember: leaving one covered in cloth in the sun runs a risk of cooking it.

