

Pensacola News Journal
for: Sunday, Dec. 31, 2000
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Freezes Cause Gardening Concerns

Keep the pruning shears stored for awhile. Judging by discussions with concerned gardeners, many are ready to break out the pruning tools and clip away cold damaged shrub branches.

While the intent is good, this is the wrong time to do any heavy shrub pruning jobs. It's true that we have had a couple of freezes, but there are probably more to come. Pruning this early in the winter would likely have two negative results. First, this early in the season it would be impossible to know the extent of cold damage on a particular plant. Odds are, too much or too little would be cut away.

A second, and more important reason to delay is that pruning stimulates growth. The last thing that a gardener would like to do is stimulate tender growth during a warm period in January that could be killed by subsequent freezes.

Some plants are not looking as well as normal for this time of year. That's because the past several winters have been unusually mild. Long time resident gardeners can, and often do, tell stories about what a real northern Gulf Coast winter is like.

I recall the winter of 89/90 when, one morning, the temperature at a plant nursery in Pace was 5 degrees F. My collection of landscape slides and photographs shows snow on blooming azaleas at my house on March 14, 1993.

Some weather experts are predicting a return to more normal winters over the next several years. If these predictions are proven to be true, then gardeners without a long time history in our area will need to plan for cold winters when planting and, in some cases, alter their expectations when growing subtropical ornamentals.

My advice to most gardeners who have shown concern about winter damage on plants is to relax, and don't overreact. Most landscape plants are more resilient than we give them credit for. I dare say that by late spring or mid-summer complete recovery of

most plants will be seen on all but the most tender species.

Instead of expending energy on pruning now, spend a little time protecting any special perennial tropicals or subtropicals that were left in the ground. Cold sensitive perennials such as lantana, mexican heather, angel's trumpet, ixora and rice-paper plant will need some help if they are to regrow next spring.

Though the tops of these and other subtropicals might have been killed to the ground, complete recovery can be experienced if the root crown and associated buds are protected during the remainder of the winter. This can be easily accomplished by mounding over the crowns with a loose material such as pine needles, shavings, pine bark or straw.

Make each mound about a foot high and about two feet wide. This will provide an insulating layer and protect the buds. Remove each mound just before new growth emerges next spring in order to prevent distortion of new shoots.

Question of the Week: I have 20 new trees that I would like to plant. There are 5 dogwoods, 5 live oaks, 5 maples and 5 Drake elms. They are in 10 gallon containers. Is it too cold to plant them?

Answer: Plant them at your first opportunity. These 4 species of trees are very cold hardy in our location and early winter is a good time for transplanting. There is however, a chance of damage to the root ball if they are left above ground in pots during an extended freeze.

The roots of many plants are more cold sensitive than the top portion. Extremely low temperatures that last for several days can cause the root balls, if left above ground, to experience direct freeze damage or to dry out because they can't absorb water.