

Cleaning Up Your Cold Damaged Plants

South Florida has avoided freezing temperatures for many years and during that time most gardeners have incorporated many gorgeous tropical plants into their home landscapes. Many of those beautiful tropical plants may have recently been severely damaged by the cold weather. Annual flowers like impatiens, coleus, begonias and tomatoes can collapse in the freeze and may need to be replaced. Tropical plants like heliconias, bananas, gingers, dieffenbachia and chenille shrubs in your garden can suffer some stem dieback some right down to the ground. If there appears to be some stems that have died back remove them with a sharp, clean hand pruner.

Tender shrubs that lost their leaves initially should grow back. When only leaves sprout back on the top portions of the shrubs, you may need to prune to rejuvenate. This type of pruning should be done over a period of 3 years, removing 1/3 of the old stems right down to the ground each year until the entire shrub looks new and bushy again.

On established exotic trees and shrubs cold injury may appear as a lack of spring bud break on a portion of or all of the plant, or as an overall weak appearance. Branch tips may be damaged while older wood is free of injury. Cold injured wood can be identified by examining the cambium layer (food conducting tissue) under the bark for black or brown coloration. Prune these branches behind the point of discoloration. If the cambium layer just under the bark is still green, then the stem is alive no need to remove any parts of these branches. To support new Spring growth, fertilize your entire landscape this month with a slow release 8-2-12 with micronutrients.

The cold weather can cause the older fronds on your coconut palms to turn totally brown, those dead leaves will need to be removed.

Florida homeowners enjoy a vast array of plant materials and often desire a tropical or semitropical appearance to their landscapes. Plants are often planted past their northern limit in Florida, although microclimates differ dramatically. Tropical and subtropical plants can be used effectively in the landscape, but they must be protected or replaced when necessary. A combination of tender and hardy plants should be planted in order to prevent total devastation of the landscape by extremely cold weather.

Damage on some plants and trees cannot be seen for several weeks.

Call the Master Gardener Volunteer Hotline with your cold damage pruning questions Monday-Friday 9AM-4PM at 233-1750 or stop by the Palm Beach County Cooperative Extension Service to pick up a University of Florida proper pruning publication at 531 North Military Trail WPB.



Figure 1: Mounts Botanical Garden Horticulturists Mike Page and Joel Crippen wrapping tropical cacao-chocolate tree to keep it warm.