

## **Delay pruning cold injured plants**

**Q.** With the recent cold weather, some of my landscape plants experienced freeze damage. Should I prune these plants now to remove the dead and injured leaves and branches?

**A.** If you can tolerate the fact that cold injury causes plants to look like an eyesore in the landscape, it's best to wait until new growth occurs in spring after the danger of another frost or freeze before doing much pruning.

As a rule, it's difficult to tell how much damage has been done until plants start new growth in spring. If you prune immediately after a freeze, you may cut away live wood that doesn't have to be lost. Also, leaves and branches, which have been killed, can help protect the rest of a plant against further cold injury.

Stem damage on woody shrubs and trees usually is not evident until spring and early summer when some branches die. That will be the time to prune. Cut out dead branches, as you find them, always pruning back to live wood. Don't worry too much about leaf damage on woody shrubs and trees. In most cases, as new leaves come out in spring, the old frost-burned leaves will drop off the plants.

Many times pruning will force a plant to produce new growth. The new growth will be much more susceptible to the next frost or freeze.

Cold weather will come and go through our North Florida winters – one week it's spring-like and the next it's winter-like. Many of the tropical ornamentals such as Mexican Heather and tropical hibiscus will look like “dead sticks” through the winter. But if possible, resist the urge to prune until after the last killing frost. A killing frost is a frost heavy enough to kill tender vegetation. The date that we experience the last killing frost can vary to some extent from year to year but will usually occur around the middle of March. The last killing frost also varies to some degree based on your location within the county. Coastal locations along the Gulf will usually not experience as late a freeze as compared to more northern areas within the county.

Some tender landscape ornamentals may not survive. But don't give up on them too soon. Allow enough time for them to revive after warm weather returns. If a plant does not recover come spring or if it is weak and not worth keeping, it's time to replace it.

Larry Williams, UF/IFAS Extension Agent, Okaloosa County, January 14, 2009