

Be patient with cold injured plants

The long range forecast for this winter is for milder temperatures. But we have certainly gotten off to a colder start. And winter has not started, yet. Officially, the first day of the astronomical winter is December 21.

Our winter temperatures go back and forth all season – one week it's winter, the next week we think spring has sprung and then winter decides to pay us a visit again. This “on” and “off” with mild temperatures and cold temperatures is typical here in North Florida.

As a result of the freezing periods, the less cold hardy tropical and subtropical landscape plants can be injured. For example, it's normal for popular landscape plants such as oleander, hibiscus, bottlebrush and philodendron to suffer some cold damage. Then, the first impulse for many gardeners is to cut away the dead and dying leaves and branches. But this really is not the best idea.

During winter it's difficult to tell how much damage has been done to these plants. If you prune immediately after a freeze, you probably will cut away live wood that does not have to be lost. Also, leaves and branches, which have been killed, can help protect the rest of the plant when the next freeze strikes.

Some of the more tender landscape plants such as bananas, cassia, gingers, tropical hibiscus and many of the tropical perennials may have been severely injured with this first round of freezing temperatures. Don't give up on them too soon. These plants may surprise you by sending up new shoots come spring. Some of these plants require warm soil temperatures before they'll produce new growth. Many of the gingers, for example, may not show any signs of life until April or May of 2011.

Some winter and spring flowering plants such as camellias and azaleas may experience flower bud damage. This will be evident at blooming time with few to no flowers. Cold damaged camellia flower buds will either drop off the plant or only partially open showing brown centers. Stem damage will show up in spring and early summer when some of the branches die. Cold injured leaves will fall as new spring growth occurs.

Individual stems on some azalea varieties and bottlebrush plants are prone to splitting or cracking during a freeze. These dead branches should be pruned out as they occur in spring and summer, cutting below the split or injured area into healthy wood.

February and early March can bring occasional frosts and freezes. When spring really has sprung, you'll know what survived and what didn't. That's the time to prune.

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