Do blueberry and kumquat plants need to be covered in freezing weather?

A. Blueberries are a temperate fruit and are native to North Florida and the Southeastern U.S. As such, they are well adapted to our climate and do not need to be covered during a freeze. Actually, blueberries require a certain amount of colder weather in order to produce fruit. As explained in the UF/IFAS Extension publication Blueberry Gardener's Guide, "Generally, rabbiteye blueberries grow well in areas of Florida that have winters as cold, or colder, than Ocala. The southern highbush cultivars that are commonly grown in Florida are well adapted to areas south of Ocala and north of Sebring, although they will grow reasonably well in Alachua County." The entire document is available online at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG359. In our area of the state, you are better off growing rabbiteye cultivars rather than the southern highbush cultivars. This is because southern highbush cultivars flower very early, making them more susceptible to late winter/early spring freezes.

Kumquats, though not native, are one of the more cold hardy citrus types. "Kumquats exceed even satsuma in terms of cold-hardiness, being able to sustain -12°C (10° F) when fully dormant. Active growth occurs only at relatively high temperatures, so the plants remain semi-dormant during late fall, winter and early spring in warm temperate climates. They normally bloom long after citrus and cease active growth earlier in the fall, which contributes to their cold-hardiness." This is a quote from the UF/IFAS Extension publication Cold-Hardy Citrus for North Florida, which is available online at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG074.

Note the "fully dormant" qualification in the above quote. Pruning or fertilizing after September can encourage a late flush of young, tender growth. This can result in additional cold injury during a freeze. Covering tender plants for weeks at a time during the winter (particularly with plastic) can result in the plant breaking dormancy under the warm covering. This will make the plant more susceptible to cold injury from a late freeze once the covering is removed. When covering plants, it's best to provide the covering while freezing temperatures exist. And quickly remove the covering early the morning following a freeze once the temperature is above freezing. This may require covering and uncovering a cold sensitive plant repeatedly - each time a hard freeze is forecast. It's important to realize that the degree of dormancy plays a significant role in how well a cold sensitive plant does during a freeze. As stated in Cold-Hardy Citrus for North Florida, "Satsuma may withstand -9°C (15°F) in January when it is completely dormant and hardy, but it may be seriously damaged at -3°C (26°F) in mid-November."

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