

*Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office*



**PHOTO CREDIT:** William M. Johnson

**A variety of items you already have around your home can be used to provide excellent cold weather protection for plants, including large towels (pictured above). Remember that insulating covers need not be expensive nor sophisticated, just effective.**

Our winters tend to be relatively mild and that's considered a blessing by most folks. Nevertheless, temperatures can occasionally dip low enough to be able to inflict a significant toll on many landscape plants in the Galveston County area.

We had a significant cold

snap last year during January that caused many gardeners (including me) to scramble a bit to move tropical plants to the garage. As I write this column, meteorologists are forecasting that temperatures will dive into the low thirties over the weekend after an Arctic front arrives.

So that we can be proactive horticulturists instead of reactive horticulturists, here are some guidelines to practice to help avoid or reduce cold injury to plants. Save this information and you will know what to do in case a real blue norther should bear down on us this winter!



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Several factors will influence the extent of cold injury damage to landscape trees and shrubs and even certain types of fruit, especially citrus. Such factors include variety (some may be more cold tolerant than others) and age (recent plantings that are not well-established are more susceptible to cold injury).

A very important factor is the general health of a plant. Plants grown under low soil fertility or drought conditions or plants that suffered severe disease and/or insect problems during the summer growing season are far more likely to sustain damage.

However, homeowners can take protective measures to help reduce the occurrence of cold injury to landscape and fruit plants if cold weather conditions occur. These steps include the following:

**PROVIDE INSULATING COVER TO PLANTS.** Here are some things you already have around your house that can be used for just this purpose: paper bags, newspaper, flower pots, bath towels, beach towels, bed sheets, blankets, painter's drop cloths, etc.

Weigh them down with bricks and rocks or use clothespins, twine and staplers to hold them in place. Caution should be used when using plastic sheeting during prolonged hard freezes as plant leaves touching the plastic may suffer cold injury.

However, it can be very beneficial

to place plastic underneath blankets, sheets, etc. for large plants. The important thing to remember is to protect your plants from freezing temperatures and hopefully you've already protected the plant's roots by mulching in the fall.

**KEEP PLANTS WELL-WATERED.** Providing proper soil moisture conditions is an extremely important plant-saving practice for winter. It is very important that plants—those in the soil as well as those in containers—be provided adequate moisture throughout the winter season.

The wind in the winter, like the sun in the summer, will dry soils. Be especially sure that soils are well-watered if a cold snap appears to be forthcoming to prevent plant roots from drying out. Freeze damage on plants can be significantly reduced or avoided if plants have adequate soil moisture before a severe cold snap occurs.

**PROVIDE PROTECTION TO ROOTS AND CROWN.** One of the most sensible ways to protect a plant from the effects of a severe freeze is to protect its roots and crown by mulching. Mulch is an excellent insulator. If the roots and crown survive, the plant can usually be salvaged and new top growth developed.

Use mulches around annuals, perennial plantings, roses, etc. Clean straw, shredded pine bark, cottonseed hulls, compost, etc. make excellent mulches. In fact, most

Protecting Plants from Cold Damage

plants will benefit significantly if mulched throughout the year.

**DELAY HEAVY PRUNING.** In the event of a freeze, do not do any pruning until late winter or early spring even though affected woody plants may appear to be in poor condition. This applies to all citrus and ornamentals, including palm trees.

Heavy pruning after a hard freeze can stimulate new growth during a warm spell which could easily be burned back if another cold snap occur. Also, it is easier to prune and shape ornamentals after the full extent of damage is known.

Yes, we've had some beautiful and sunny weather conditions over the last few days. But take heed to the above steps and if a severe cold snap occurs, your plants will be in good shape.

**If space allows, please include the following:**

Upcoming Seminar

**WHAT:** KITCHEN GARDENING  
**WHEN:** 1:00 - 3:00 p.m. on Saturday, January 19  
**WHERE:** Galveston County AgriLife Extension Office located at 4102-B Main Street (Carbide Park) in La Marque. No fee but pre-registration requested (phone: 281-309-5065; e-mail [galvcountymgs@gmail.com](mailto:galvcountymgs@gmail.com)).

