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Water and Wait (or What to Do After the Big Chill)

By Tony Sarah, Horticulturist

Unless you have a yard full of nothing but rocks, you have probably lost some type of plant material to the cold temperatures we recently experienced. As you drive around town, you can see the signs everywhere. Cacti blackened or collapsed, citrus burned from cold, leaves falling off of mesquites, and the list goes on... Hope is not entirely lost though! Plants are much more resilient than we give them credit for, so don't give them up for dead yet.

First let's go over some basics:

- Water your plants as needed. Too much water can cause the roots to rot, not enough can do further damage to them.
- Do not fertilize until you begin to see signs of new growth. Fertilizing a plant that is not actively growing can also cause damage.
- Do not prune back any dead plant material until you see signs of recovery. The dead material provides insulation and protection from further damage due to cold weather and you might also be pruning off material that could recover. Wait until you see growth, then you'll have an accurate guideline for pruning.
- Wait until nighttime temperatures stay consistently around 50 degrees, then you should start seeing visible signs of recovery. If you do not, then you've probably lost the plant.

Now that we've covered that, we can go into some specifics. We'd like to state that there is very little anyone could have done to prevent the damage. This winter was unusual in that it stayed consistently warm right up until the big freeze. This meant that most plants were actively growing when the cold hit. Not only did it get brutally cold (for Southern Arizona), but it was also a sustained cold for several days. Therefore, plants that are

normally considered to be hardy were bitten by the freeze, and plants that are less hardy, such as citrus, palms, cacti and bougainvillea were devastated. Even if you were able to cover your plants, for most people it didn't help much. We are so sorry for your losses!

Cacti & Succulents

Many cacti and most succulents suffered severe damage and/or death (entire or parts). Many prickly pears around town simply melted. The reason that the cacti and succulents 'melt' is that their internal cell structures froze and burst. Then when the temperature warmed up enough for them to thaw, the plant basically liquefies. Some cacti and succulents may appear to be only partially damaged, however you do not want to cut them back yet because the damage may go down farther than you think. Some damage doesn't even appear for several weeks. It is important to wait it out. As the weather warms up, the 'sap' will start flowing again and then any damage that may have occurred will show up. Some cacti that are not showing damage now may end up dying from the inside out.

Palm Trees

Palm Trees also suffered severe damage. We are seeing many Sago palms with frozen fronds. Since they only put out new fronds once a year, you may have to wait until next year to see if they survived. Queen palms are usually hardy to the mid-teens but it looks like many of them may have been lost to this cold snap. The only way to tell if your palm is alive (if it is short enough to reach the top) is to gently tug on the center frond. If it readily comes out, your palm is dead. If you meet with resistance, stop pulling! Your palm may still have life left in it. If you cannot reach the top of the palm, you will have to wait and see if you get any new green fronds coming up out of the center. This could take a month or more. Have patience.

Citrus Trees

Citrus trees were really hit really hard and suffered extreme damage. Hold off on pruning and fertilizing. Wait for warmer temperatures to see new growth. If and when new growth appears, you can prune back the dead limbs. At this time, you can also fertilize, but do so at half the recommended strength, followed by a full strength application six weeks after that. Any fruit that may have been on the tree at the time of the freeze is probably ruined. The trees have been set back so far by this freeze that you probably won't get any fruit this year either. Hopefully, next year will be better!

Shrubs

Much of the shrubbery that was damaged by the cold will need plenty of time to recover. Some shrubs, such as Lantana, Cassia, red Fairy Duster (Calliandra), Orange & Yellow Bells (Tecoma) will take until at least mid-March to show any signs of recovery, if they do at all. Bougainvillea and Hibiscus are probably not going to come back, depending on your microclimate and how much protection they had. Red Mexican Bird of Paradise

(*Caesalpinia pulcherrama*) could come back from the roots, but that may not happen until mid-April to mid-May. Many plants that are native to the desert come from farther south in Mexico, so therefore are less hardy to the cold.

We hope that covers most of what has been damaged in your yard. Trees such as Mesquites, Acacias (especially Willow Acacias), some pine trees, etc. have been damaged but will probably survive. Again, it is just a waiting game. Water your cold-damaged plants once a week (2-3 hours) for smaller items, once every two weeks (3-5 hours) for established trees and large shrubs. Watering slowly and deeply allows the water to penetrate down to the root system, thoroughly moistening the area. As the weather warms up and the plants start to grow, then you can gradually return to your normal watering schedule. Frozen foliage on the plants, especially trees, will continue to drop during the next few weeks. Better pull out the rakes! Call us at 885-7466 or stop by The Magic Garden if you have any other questions.