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Spring Gardening in Tucson

By Tony Sarah, Horticulturist

Congratulations! You survived the winter and now you're ready to get your garden back in shape for spring. You probably want to know where to start...

Yard clean-up is at the top of the list. Chances are, you have a yard full of dead leaves and twigs as well as a few plants and trees that didn't make it. Rake up all the debris. Plant debris can harbor insects and diseases, even through the cold weather. Many insect eggs and plant pathogens are not affected by cold, although we should see a reduced amount of insect pests this year. Dispose of dead leaves in the garbage, not the compost pile, if you believe there may be insects or disease pathogens. Never put branches or twigs (even small ones) in the compost pile as they take a greater amount of time to decompose than leaf litter and other compost ingredients. In addition to the extended decomposition time, the microorganisms that perform this action will actually rob the compost of much needed nutrients (especially nitrogen).

Trees and plants that you know for certain have died may be removed. If there is any question in your mind as to whether they are still alive, give them more time. Especially citrus trees or palm trees. You can find more information on what to do about your frozen plants on our website under the 'Articles and Information' tab. The article is called 'What to Do After the Big Chill'. One way of finding out if your plants are alive is to scratch the trunk of the plant. If there is green underneath and there is flexibility in the limbs, there may be life! Once you see new growth appear, you can use that as a guideline for pruning most trees and shrubs. Make certain when pruning shrubs to leave them wider at the bottom than the top so sunlight and air can penetrate to the base.

Evergreen trees should be pruned in mid-March. If your evergreens have been cold damaged, prune back 6"-18" into live wood. Do not stop at the end of the dead wood, as this leaves a "weak" area on the tree, susceptible to disease and insects.

Spring is feeding time for most of your plants, shrubs and trees. Because of the damage caused by this year's hard freeze, fertilizer should be applied only after new growth (hopefully by mid-March) starts to appear and then only at half the recommended strength, to avoid causing additional cell damage. After 6 weeks, apply second feeding at full strength (according to label directions) and subsequently fertilize as you normally would.

Roses require special food, and should have been fertilized in February; however, if you have not done so, it is not too late. Citrus typically need to be fertilized around Valentine's Day. This year was an exception to the rule. Again, you will want to wait for some new growth to appear and then follow the directions above. Stone fruits, such as peaches, nectarines, plums, etc. use the same fertilizer as citrus and should be fertilized in mid-March.

Grape vines and nut trees, such as almonds, pecans, etc. require extra zinc. Most fertilizers contain a certain amount of zinc, but a supplemental dose creates healthier, more productive plants. You can find it at your local nursery sold as 'Zinc Sulfate'. Again, follow label directions for the proper amount to use on your specific plant.

Most general landscape plants require no special fertilizer; a well balanced 10-10-10 mix is ample. We like Arizona's Best! Any time you fertilize, it is extremely important to water thoroughly afterwards to avoid fertilizer burn. This should be done from above, with a hose. Drip irrigation does not do an adequate job of disseminating (dissolving and dispersing) the fertilizer. An additional heavy watering should be administered after one week.

Watering should increase at this time as well. If you have well-established trees and shrubs, they should need very little supplemental water throughout the winter, unless the weather is exceptionally dry. However, as March begins to heat things up, all of your plants will require more moisture. Depending on the plant variety, size and age, you should water deeply (slowly, for several hours) once a week. Large established trees can probably be watered every two weeks in the same fashion through the month of March. If things really warm up towards the end of the month, you may want to increase the watering frequency again. On very windy days, it is a good idea to water a little extra ahead of time to help prevent desiccation.

That about covers it! For info on soil preparation, fertilizing, etc. for annuals and vegetables, please see our article on the website called 'Tips for a Successful Vegetable Garden'.