Dealing With Cold-Damaged Plants
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Warm weather has arrived and brown landscapes should miraculously transform into shades of green. Homeowners are busily pruning away the cold-damaged plant material to brighten landscapes.

This winter we experienced several hard freezes and many tropical plants that are marginal for our area are totally brown. Ixora is a prime example of a plant that provides beautiful color but is zoned for central and south Florida. Hibiscus, lantana, bougainvillea, and other tropical plants were also damaged. If new growth has not emerged, it may be difficult to tell if the plants are alive or dead. One test is to scrape the outer bark to see if the next layer, cambium layer, is green or brown. If the cambium layer is not green but is brown or black, the stem was injured by the cold and will not come back. Sometimes there is life closer to the ground level so don't be too hasty to remove the plant.

Another test is to look for buds along the stem that are showing signs of life. If the buds are green and swelling further down the stem, remove the damaged wood just above that healthy bud. Another thing to look for is bark splitting, particularly at the base of plants. These vertical splits are common on plants like azaleas following a severe freeze and will interfere with water and nutrient flow throughout the plant. It's best to remove the damaged stems to avoid the development of cankers. Don't mistake this bark splitting for plants that have naturally exfoliating bark like oak leaf hydrangeas, crape myrtles, elms and river birch.

Several of our more tropical palms (Queen and Pygmy date palms) were also injured based on the canopy of brown leaves. The University of Florida recommends removing cold-damaged leaves but do not prune leaves if they are still green. As soon as pruning is completed, spray palms with a copper fungicide plus a spreader sticker. Repeat the application 10 days after the first or use a different broad spectrum fungicide. Make sure to cover all the damaged plant material, pruning cuts and center bud with the spray material. Don't use copper more than twice per year because of potential toxicity problems. Vascular systems of palms may also be damaged by freezes and shows up suddenly with the onset of hot weather. A sign of vascular damage is that some or all of the leaves suddenly collapse because the water cannot be moved up the trunk to the leaves. If this happens, there is nothing you can do to save the palm.

St. Augustinegrass has also been hit hard since it is the least of our cold-hardy lawns. Lawn areas that were weak going into the winter due to stresses like chinch bugs, nematodes, mowing too short, poor drainage, or heavy foot traffic are most

susceptible. Open areas are also more prone to cold damage versus areas lightly shaded by trees because trees help to hold in some ground heat. In some cases, large areas of turf are brown and are not coming back. Go ahead and rake out the dead runners and roots to prepare the soil. Try to match the new lawn with the existing variety and plant these areas by installing sod or plugs. Sod creates an instant lawn plus weeds are less of a problem compared to plugs which has open areas of bare soil ideal for weeds to take hold. Plugs will be slow to fill in but is cheaper than using sod. If using plugs, space them six inch to 12 inches apart. To establish new lawns, the key is to water frequently but lightly to prevent the plugs or sod from drying out. Don't turn the water on and forget about it as this will create disease problems. For more detailed information on installing new lawns, refer to http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/LH013.

Other plants like hydrangeas may be damaged above-ground but new growth will emerge at the base. Gingers, firespike and other perennials will come back reliably from the root system and can now be cut back to ground level. Ornamental grasses, mondo grass and liriope can be pruned back to a few inches to remove damaged leaves before new growth occurs.

The best thing to do now is to be patient and baby ailing plants. Give woody plants and perennials their spring fertilizer application. Select a quality fertilizer where the first and third number on the bag are equal or near equal and the middle number is 2 or less. Examples include 15-0-15, 18-2-18, etc. Plants that have special fertilizer needs include azaleas, palms, citrus, and pecans. Special fertilizer blends are preferred for these plants because of specific micronutrient needs or the acid-forming ability of an azalea-type fertilizer. Palm fertilizers should have an analysis of 8:1:12:4 (nitrogen:phosphorous:potassium:magnesium) with the nitrogen, potassium and magnesium in a slow-release form. The fertilizer should also have one to two percent iron (Fe) and manganese (Mn) and trace amounts of zinc (Zn), copper (Cu), and boron (B). Do not use a lawn fertilizer within thirty feet of a palm; use the palm fertilizer even if the surrounding area is lawn. Lawns should not be fertilized until they show signs of new growth.

Be in tune with water needs of these plants to avoid additional stress. La Nina has returned which means we will have a warmer and drier spring. Conserve water by following the irrigation guidelines created by St. Johns River Water Management District. Hand-water plants in beds versus using sprinkler systems to help conserve water while helping plants recover from cold damage. Remember, no watering between 10am to 4pm. Odd # homes can irrigate on Wednesdays and Saturday; even # homes on Thursday and Saturday.