

Are Your Brown Plants Giving You the Blues?

By: Lisa Hickey, Master Gardener Coordinator
February, 2009



Credit: iStockphoto/Loretta Hostettler citrus tree

Are you depressed about the cold weather and what it is doing to your outdoor plants? Tired of covering those “tropicals”? Do you want to just chop down all the over-sensitive plants and start with a new plant palette of “freeze” tolerant plants? If you were not prepared for the last few cold weather bouts, you may be witnessing cold and freeze damage to your landscape plants, especially if you live east of I-75. Don’t despair and don’t prune yet! There may be hope for some of those sad-looking plants.

Here are some interesting facts about the cold and frost in Manatee County. Frost forms ice crystals in the plants’ cells. Ice crystals poke holes in the cell wall allowing the juices to seep out of the cell. Cold and frost damage have several appearances: red tone on green leaf, brown/black crispy leaves, wilted leaves/plants, and water-soaked mushy patches. According to the USDA Hardiness Zone maps, most of Manatee County is located in hardiness zone 9. This means that the average lowest temperatures recorded in the zone are 20° – 30° F. For a plant to remain hardy in our county, it should be able to tolerate this temperature range. Those living close to the shore are in zone 10a where the Gulf of Mexico keeps the weather warmer.

Where do you start cleaning up the damage? Don’t prune yet. Some plants like native Firebush and Beautyberry will drop their damaged leaves and grow new shoots. Bananas and Bird of Paradise will send up new shoots from the mother plant. If you prune too soon, you may cut off live wood that was not damaged even if it has dead leaves. The dead

leaves also canopy and protect the live growth underneath from the next drop in temperature and frost. If you can't stand the appearance of the brown, dried-out leaves, you may gently remove them. Another interesting fact to know is that pruning encourages new growth and tender new shoots are very susceptible to cold and frost. Again, waiting for a few more weeks to prune is best. When spring has sprung, trim out the dead branches. Since the cold isn't over yet, prepare for the next drop in temperature. A healthy plant is a hardier plant.

Provide ample water & fertilization before the cold weather begins, especially the night that the temperature will plummet. Water gives off heat and creates thermal energy around the plant, plus it keeps the plant well hydrated when the winds are drying out the plant.

- ❖ Avoid planting temperature-sensitive plants in the lowest part of your landscape. Cool air sinks to the lower part of your landscape.
- ❖ Cover cold-sensitive plants and allow a head space to “trap” in heat (refer to the picture showing the use of sticks below). Many materials can be used, like cardboard, palm fronds, banana leaves, tyvek (shown in the picture), and cloth, sheets, or blankets. Last choice should be plastic because it provides very little protection from the cold.
- ❖ Under backyard citrus trees, keep the soil bare, clean of leaves or mulch, and well watered because the water in the soil radiates heat up to the tree.

