

Winter Plant Protection

During Citrus County winters, temperatures can drop low enough to cause damage to tender plants. There are a number of steps gardeners can take to help protect them.

Remember, plants don't need to be warm and toasty, only a degree to two above freezing is usually all it takes to protect them during winter's chill.

Many plants may have experienced damage in prior winters even if protected. Why is that? Often the effort did not protect the right part of the plant or the wrong materials were used to provide protection.

Plant protection - Plant canopies bundled up in a sheet receive little protection. More effective protection covers plant material all the way to the ground where it will benefit from the heating radiating up coming from the relative warmth of the ground.



Cover plant roots—Start with non-manmade mulch, such as wood chips. Mulch not only keeps the soil warmer during cold snaps, but also reduces weed competition and retains moisture.

Don't use plastic—Plastic in direct contact with leaves can actually intensify the effects of cold, causing leaves to “burn”. In addition, plastic should be removed before the sun cooks plants underneath. Most of us don't have the luxury or inclination of getting out and removing the plastic covers at “just the right time.”

Temporary protection— Blankets, sheets, cardboard box, limbs from last year's Christmas tree, or even an overturned garbage can provide good insulation. These materials are potentially more abundant and cheaper to use. Higher tech, there are fabrics called frost cloths which are lightweight and heat-retentive.



BEFORE



AFTER

Cover early—To retain heat from the ground, cover plants early in the day trapping warm underneath.

Extra warmth – Gardeners can place older style strings of lights under covers to let off heat and can help preserve cold-sensitive plants. Careful with concentrated lights like a “shop light” as they may damage plants or potentially cause a fire.

How about irrigating? - While growers may irrigate to protect strawberries and citrus, leave this practice to the professionals! Farmers use special equipment which is less likely to freeze. To assure proper application, growers stay up all night monitoring and repairing. Most of us want to be snug under the bedcovers when the temperatures dip below the freezing mark. Save time, water, and potentially your irrigation system. Do not water.

Plants in containers - Portable plants don't have the same insulation value as soil-grown plants making them more susceptible to the effects of cold weather. Many containerized plants can be moved into the garage, up against the house, or grouped together for added protection. If protection is needed, these can be wrapped with an insulating cover as well.

Healthy plants - When adding plants, first consider the site's conditions to minimize gardener intervention to survive winter's chill. Also, healthy plants are more likely to survive winter's chill than stressed plants. Monitor for pests and diseases through the winter.

Pruning - Last, after the cold temperatures, don't be in a big hurry to prune damage. Pruning actually sends a message to the plant to put on new growth. In central Florida, it is difficult to know exactly



**Green healthy material
under the bark**

when winter is over. Don't send the message to put on new growth until late March or even April. Dead wood provides a small amount of additional protection for the next cold snap. Cold-damaged wood can be identified by scratching the bark and looking for dark or dull discoloration, indicating dead plant tissue. Prune these branches behind the point of discoloration. Green tissue indicates live wood.



**No living material under
the bark**

Expert assistance is available at UF/IFAS Citrus Co. Extension office 3650 W. Sovereign Path, Lecanto or 352-527-5700.

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