Frequently Asked Questions Fact Sheet

Cold Protection

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What are common misconceptions about weather in Central Florida?
Many residents new to Central Florida think that we live in the tropics. This is not the case, Lake and Sumter Counties are considered to be a subtropical environment, which means each year we are more than likely to receive occasional freezing weather.

What plants are most susceptible to frost damage?
Tropical plants and summer annuals are most susceptible to freezing temperatures. Ornamental tropical plants typically have brightly colored foliage and large leaves which make them appealing to the Central Florida gardener. In many cases, tropical plants will not survive our subtropical weather. Grow tropical and tender plants in containers or as annuals. You can incorporate them into a landscape, but be sure to use a mixture of hardy and temperate plants so that your entire landscape does not suffer from freezing temperatures.

How should I select plants that will not be damaged by a freeze?
Look for plants that are recommended for the USDA hardiness zone 9A. This will require a little research in order to know this. Next time you visit the garden center write down the names of the plants you want to purchase, but don’t purchase them yet. Go home and research these plants on the internet. Useful sites include solutionsforyourlife.com and floridayards.org. You can also use your extension office to provide suggestions for plant material.

If a plant is recommended for zone 9A, does that mean the plant will not be damaged by a freeze?
Not necessarily, it means that the plant will survive the conditions in this environment. You may have a plant that is listed for zone 9A and the foliage may still be damaged, however it will come back from the root system.

What can be practiced to help plants survive freezing temperature?
Place tender plants near structures that will block cold winds or plant them underneath tree canopies. Try to keep plants as healthy as possible by fertilizing appropriately. Avoid late fall fertilization or pruning. Use organic mulches to insulate plant roots.

What can I do the day before a freeze?
Make sure your plants are watered and the soil is moist, but not saturated. Soil moisture can radiate heat towards the plant during a freeze. Group containers together or move them indoors. Cover plants to offer protection.
What should be used to cover tender plants?
Fabric blankets and sheets can be used. Plastic should be avoided.

How should these coverings be used?
Make sure to secure the coverings all the way to the ground. You are trying to reduce heat loss from the soil and the plant. Secure with ground stakes so winds do not blow off the coverings. If possible, try to provide a structure around the plant so that the fabric does not touch the plant. Where the plant touches the fabric heat loss will occur, causing foliage damage. Uncover plants when temperatures reach above freezing.

Should water be sprinkled on tender plants during a freeze?
Not for the homeowner. Citrus growers and nurserymen will do this, but they have this down to a science. They know exactly when to start and stop watering. A constant film of water needs to be sprayed on the plant and most homeowner irrigation systems cannot provide this.

Is there anything that can be done after a freeze to help plants recover?
A thorough watering after a freeze can help plants recover. Plants are prone to desiccation during freezing events.

When should cold damaged plants be pruned?
Wait until the danger of frost has passed. This is around mid March for Central Florida. If you prune now, additional cold temperatures may cause damage further into the plant. By leaving the frost damaged leaves and stems in place, further protection will be provided.

Sources: