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Well the long-awaited cold weather we have been expecting has finally arrived during this past week. For the first time this year, I had to go to the closet and drag out a jacket, which for me tells me that it is pretty cold. One thing that certainly happens during the first really cold snap is that many people call the office to ask about protecting plants during the cold weather.

This is certainly a great question as our long summer growing season and typically very mild (and as is the case for this year almost summer-like) fall growing season allows a few more weeks of growth and enjoyment out of our gardens and ornamental beds.

As with many other things the first step in preventing repeated problems with cold weather damage is to select plants that are adapted to grow in our area. For example, there is a very good reason why most oak trees do well in our area while banana trees are often pounded by freeze events. We are all aware of the old saying “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”. Check your plant’s USDA plant hardiness zone before purchasing a plant for your landscape. The plant hardiness zone map will tell you whether that plant should be able to cope with our climate zone. In our case select plants that are hardy to a zone seven, the higher the number indicates less cold hardiness. You can check the plant hardiness zone of your plant by consulting the nursery or garden center supplier, a good gardening book, or by contacting the county Extension office.

You can also help to prevent cold weather damage by avoiding planting sensitive plants in low lying areas of your landscape. Remember that cold air tends to settle into low areas so it is possible to have plants in low lying areas around your yard or garden to be severely cold damaged while other plants of the exact same species in higher or more protected areas suffer no damage at all.

One of the best ways to provide protection for our prized landscape plants is to provide them with cover. While I do understand that it is impossible for us to cover an entire landscape or garden, providing cover works very well for specimen plants, plants grown in containers, or small bed areas.

There are several materials that can be used for covering plants. Sheets, light blankets, or even excess burlap sacks can work very effectively.

Covering your plants with such materials allows the plant to capture radiant heat from the soil, so it is important that when you cover plants make sure your cover contacts the soil's surface on all sides of the plant. Many people use plastic to cover the plants. While plastic can work, I personally am not fond of using plastic. If the plastic touches the plant foliage, you will lose its insulation effect and it can also cause scorching of the plant when the sun comes up the next day. Thus it is very important to never let any material that you use to cover your plants to actually contact the foliage of the plant...it defeats the whole purpose of covering them in the first place.

Keep in mind that if you cover your plants the warming effect comes not necessarily from the covering itself but rather the covering helps to catch and hold heat released from the soil. It is important to remember that your cover should have ground to ground contact on all sides of the plant in order to be of the most benefit.

Be sure to remove all plant coverings regardless of the material the next morning to allow for light and airflow and to prevent overheating from the sun.

If you have small tender individual plants you can even use such things as old milk jugs, jars, or even large paper cups to provide protection.

Another way to offer your plants some freeze protection especially before an anticipated freeze event is to thoroughly water them the night before. The water will actually make the air temperature around your plants a little bit warmer and it will also allow the plant to replace moisture lost through transpiration. Damp versus dry soil can actually mean the difference between saving your plants or having them suffer severe cold weather damage during a freeze event.

Mulching will also help by creating a barrier between the outside air and the root system of your plant. The mulch also helps to hold soil moisture thus helping to insulate the plant roots. While mulch may not prevent frost damage to blooms or above ground structures it will definitely help to protect the plant's most important structure...its root system.

Potted or containerized plants are the most susceptible to cold damage of anything in our landscape because their root systems are less protected and because pots and containers usually drain so well they are usually drier as well. Newly established trees, shrubs, flowers, and even turfgrass are much more likely to be severely damaged by cold weather; while established woody ornamental plants should come through our winters without major problems.

Relocate potted plants to a protected location such as a basement, garage, or storage building when there is a chance of freezing weather.

Wrapping the container in burlap or even that extra bubble wrap that you can never figure out what to do with will help add extra protection if the plant cannot be moved.

Other cultural practices can also help to reduce the amount of cold damage that your plants will suffer. One of the most common mistakes that I see is pruning at the wrong time of year. In general fall pruning is not a good idea. Remember that pruning forces the plant to respond by trying to put on new growth. The new growth is very lush and tender and will be much more prone to cold weather damage. Here in the deep South we rarely if ever get enough cold fall weather to cause plants, especially woody ornamentals or fruit trees, to go dormant. We also typically get periods of warm fall and early winter weather that can also cause plants to put on new growth only to be damaged by later frosts and cold weather.

Late fall fertilization can also be a culprit that causes winter damage to landscape plants. Fertilizing in the late fall, especially with nitrogen fertilizers, also causes plants to begin putting on new growth leading to cold damage. There are some exceptions of course such as winter annuals and cool season turfgrass which can be fertilized in the fall.