

Cold Protection for Sensitive Plants

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Thursday, December 26, 2002

It's that time of year when some nights the temperatures are dropping below freezing. In many cases there is no reason for concern, but there are some plants that will need a little help in order to better survive the winter.

Most plants that are normally grown here do not require special attention. They are adapted to low temperatures. As long as they are relatively healthy and are not suffering from drought or nutrient deficiencies or excesses, they survive our winters just fine.

The tropical and subtropical shrubs on the other hand, are subject to being killed to the ground or worse, depending upon how low the temperature goes and associated conditions during a particular freeze. These tender shrubs have become very popular over the past 10 years and gardeners are establishing them because they are colorful and thrive during our hot, humid summers.

Hibiscus, Pentas, Allamanda, Cassia, Datura and Plumbago are examples of such cold sensitive plants. Though they can be seriously winter damaged, many gardeners feel that the benefits outweigh the risk. Following are some tips for helping these and other tender shrubs to survive the winter.

Thoroughly irrigate 1 or 2 days before a freeze is expected. Well-watered plants survive extremely low temperatures better than those that are drought stressed.

Covering can provide several degrees of cold protection. However, this method requires a commitment, so limit its use only to those more valuable tender plants.

Proper covering protects by trapping ground heat, so in order to work the material must be draped over the entire plant and in contact with the ground on all sides. The material should be opaque, not clear. Plastic makes a poor covering. Use blankets, sheets or similar materials. It will be necessary to secure the covering material to the ground by placing bricks, blocks or other heavy objects.

The covering should be in place a few hours before a freeze is expected to occur and must be removed when temperatures rise above freezing. Coverings left on for too long, being exposed to rising temperatures and direct sun can result in serious plant damage. Ironically, many plants have been protected through a cold night, only to be baked the next day because the covering was not removed promptly.

Mounding protects the base of plants against hard freezes. This method is commonly used on citrus and other cold sensitive grafted plants.

Just before the first freeze pile sand, shavings, pine needles or similar porous material around the base of the plant to a height of 12 to 18 inches. The material can be left in place all winter

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but must be removed as soon as the danger of extreme cold has passed in late winter or early spring. Mounding insulates the trunk or stem base and helps to ensure that at least some live tissue above the graft union will survive hard freezes.

Potted tropicals or subtropicals should be brought indoors for the winter. Placement in a greenhouse is ideal, but they can be over-wintered in a bright room or even in a garage.

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