It’s Time to Protect Tropicals from the Cold

Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: With just a little cold-protection, many tropicals can be grown in our area.

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Like a lot of folks who grow tropical plants, I do it for several reasons. Their beautiful, colorful flowers and foliage brighten my garden and allow me to escape to a tropical paradise in my own back yard. It also provides me with a challenge, to grow a plant that many people need a plane ticket to see.

We’re lucky enough to be living in a region that allows us to grow a wide range of tropical plants. And with a little innovation and elbow grease we can do a lot to stretch the range even farther. The keys to having such beauties as Angel Trumpet (*Brugmansia* spp.), papaya, key lime, and New Zealand flax (*Phormium tenax*) grace our gardens lie in a few simple frost protection solutions.

The first consideration for successful zone denial is location, or technically “microclimate”. Even a small property can have many microclimates. For example, a small shed, or even a large tree, can block the cold north wind. The slightest slope will funnel cold air down and away on a still winter night. Tree canopies can provide a great deal of frost protection. The south and west walls of a building, especially a heated building, will radiate warmth through the night. A water body, even a small pond, can moderate temperatures over a surprisingly large area. Think about where you want to be on the bitterest, coldest February morning... in the sun and out of the wind, right? That’s where your tropical treasures want to be, too.
There are many tropical plants that can be successfully grown as perennials in our area. The trick to getting these through the winter is to protect them before they succumb to freezing temperatures. Cut them down BEFORE the first frost, a few inches above the ground. Mulch with a layer of pine straw. Pine straw is a good insulator and also acts to deter stem rot during warm spells throughout the winter. Be sure to pull back this protective layer of mulch in the spring to allow the plant to push new growth. This technique works for Brugmansia, Hibiscus, and many other tropical plants.

Another method of frost protection is to wrap just the lower trunks of tender vines and trees like Tecoma stans (yellowbells) with a layer of insulation. The same products you use to protect your exposed water pipes work well for this job. Be sure to check under the covering from time to time to make sure there’s no rot or insect buildup.

A technique used by most people is to cover their plants with a sheet or blanket when temperatures dip low for the night. This works for frosts or light freezes (say twenty six degrees F). But our area is known to have occasional hard freezes in the low twenties and even into the teens. It’s on these occasions that plants need some extra help to make it through. Surviving these freezes requires just a few simple steps:

- First make sure your plant is well watered. Dry plants are more susceptible to being killed in a freeze. Also, a moist soil absorbs more heat from the sun during the day and radiates that heat during the night, helping to protect the plant.
- Get your frost protection blankets on in the afternoon. This will allow you to build up some heat inside them to help keep them warm during the freeze.
- Use a two-layer blanket system. First use an insulating layer against the plant. This can be a frost-cloth, a sheet, blanket or even an old tarp. On top of that put a layer of plastic. It can be clear or black plastic. Be sure your covers are long enough to reach the ground and weigh them down with something heavy so that your warm air doesn’t escape. Don’t put plastic on a plant, though, without first putting on the cloth layer. Plastic alone won’t do the trick.
- Be sure to uncover the plants the next morning before they overheat. If the freeze lasts for more than a day, just crack open the covers to let them breath during the warm part of the day.

A little planning and preparation can take the sting out of winter and allow the tropical paradise to resprout again next spring in your backyard.

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