

DEEP FREEZE 2008

By Ralph E. Mitchell

As I look back on my 8th January here in Charlotte County, this time of year has become fairly predictable as far as cold weather is concerned. It seems that almost every year, during the first week in January, we have a frost or freeze. Our most recent cold snap was no exception. I did receive some frost/freeze damage in my yard to the usual suspects which always looks bad and is somewhat depressing. However, this is a temporary condition and most everything eventually grows back - sometimes more than expected! How do you deal with our yearly cold weather in the landscape? I would like to offer some suggestions on how to beat, work around, or avoid cold and freeze damage to your landscape plants.

My first point will be to plan before you plant. Keep in mind that we are in certain hardiness zones which gives a sense of what the minimal low temperature could be in our area. For the most part we are in zones 9b which changes near the Peace River to 10a; more or less. Hardiness zone 9b means that the average annual minimal temperature in that area could range from 30°F down to 25°F. Zone 10a indicates that we could expect 35°F to 30°F. The closer you are to the water, the more chances there are of finding a sliver of Zone 10a (or higher) or in other words a "micro-climate". A micro-climate is a place that is often warmer or more protected than the surrounding landscape. The shade provided by a tree can offer a reduction in cold injury by reducing the heat loss from the ground. However, plants that need full sun will of course not do well under these circumstances. Fences and buildings can also protect plants from frigid winds and some associated freeze injury. Hardiness zones are not completely exact and can vary a bit, but

at least they give you an idea what plant is ideal for a spot, what plant is not going to make it, and what plant may be marginal. Local winter weather can also change from year-to-year where a hard freeze could invade our county on rare occasions.

Culturally, avoid fall pruning that may initiate a flush of new growth. This new growth will be tender and more susceptible to cold temperatures. Overall, healthy plants will better withstand cold temperatures. Pest management will assist with this as will proper fertilizer practices. When a frost or freeze warning is on, there are other methods of protection that can be completed. Any plant that is in a container can be moved indoors or temporarily gathered together outside, mulched to reduce heat loss from the containers, and covered with a cloth sheet or quilt. For container or in-ground established plants, arrange the covering so that it extends to the ground and does not touch the foliage. Leaves that touch the covering can be injured as heat is transferred from the foliage to the cold cover. Water can also be used as freeze protection. As water changes from a liquid to a solid state, it gives off a tiny bit of heat - just enough to prevent damage. Water must be sprinkled on as freezing begins and kept up until thawing is finished.

After the freeze event, inspect the plants for damage, but don't jump to remove any injured parts. Truly dead leaves can be removed when they turn brown. Don't prune any woody parts out until you see new growth in the spring as you must allow time to be able to determine what is truly dead and what is still alive. Once damage has been determined, prune just below the dead portion.

So, don't get disappointed or disheartened! We have to face this weather each year and can deal with it with common sense and practical prevention. And, if you are a cold weather vegetable fan as I am, this is perfect

weather for cabbages, collards, mustard, cauliflower, lettuce, and broccoli. Otherwise, watch the local weather reports and have your supplies on hand. It will get warm again!

For more information on all types of gardening subjects, please contact our Master Gardeners on the Plant Lifeline at 941.764.4340 from 1:00pm-4:00pm Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Our office is located at 25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3, in Port Charlotte. Our **Plant Clinics** are available across the county:

- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** Thursdays 10:00am-1:00pm.
- **Mid-County Regional Library** 1st and 3rd Thursday of month 1:00pm-3:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3rd Tuesday of month 1:00pm-4:00pm.
- **South Gulf Cove Learning Garden** 3rd Wednesday of month 9:00am-12:00pm.

Monthly **Plant Clinics** are Saturdays 9:00am-12:00pm at the following locations:

- **Peachland Promenades Publix** - 2nd Saturday of month.
- **Home Depot Murdock & Home Depot Punta Gorda** - 3rd Saturday of month.
- **Murdock Lowes Garden Center** - 4th Saturday of month.

Ralph Mitchell is the County Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for the Charlotte County Cooperative Extension Service. You may contact him by email (Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com). You may also contact a volunteer Master Gardener 1:00pm-4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 941.764.4340 or by email (Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com).

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4340. Allison can help educate you about the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Program so that you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.

Resource:

Ingram, D.L. & Yeager, T.H. (2003) Cold Protection of Ornamental Plants, University of Florida/IFAS Extension Service.