

Frost Damage

Frost is the most common type of cold weather plant injury in our area. When low temperatures combine with humidity and calm, clear nights, surfaces such as leaves and car windshields cool faster than the surrounding air. This causes moisture to condense on areas exposed to the air, hence frost. Young plants, those recently transplanted, plants near washes, and those planted in the open are usually particularly vulnerable. Frost is bad enough, but a freeze is worse. Plants require even more protection during a freeze. Freezes occur when temperatures drop below 32 degrees. This does not happen often in this area, but it DOES happen.

Now for the basics of protection. Since warmth can radiate upward from the earth and cold is dropping from the sky, we want to cover plants totally if possible. Cloth is best to use, as plastic tends to be a poor insulator and foliage in contact with the plastic may still burn. Put covers in place before temperatures start to drop and remove them the next day as soon as temperatures rise to a safe level. This will allow the soil under the plant to warm back up. An incandescent light combined with cloth can protect even the most frost-tender plants, but be smart! Light bulbs have been known to start fires and will definitely burn any plant material they come in contact with.

If frost damage has already snuck up on you and your plants have taken on that “just blow-torched” look, DO NOT TRIM IT OFF. The burnt foliage will help protect the more tender leaves underneath and prevent further damage. The importance of waiting to get out the pruners until the danger of frost has passed cannot be over-emphasized! Many of our plants will rise again like the proverbial “phoenix” with a little patience. Another important note, discontinue fertilizing all shrubs and trees until spring, as new growth is very tender to frost.

Mountain States Wholesale Nursery has a handy website to learn which plants are cold tolerant. Their site is mswn.com. Click on Plant Information, then Cold Tolerances. This will pull up an extensive plant list that shows the lowest temperatures our landscape plants can tolerate.