



TLC for Backyard Frost Damaged Citrus

by Neil Fernbaugh, UC Master Gardener

The December 2013 freeze was the worst freeze in our citrus belt since 1990. For those of us with backyard citrus, the damage to our trees may have ranged from minimal to severe, depending on what kind of citrus we grow, how well we protected the trees, and our specific location. County-wide, some citrus growers lost whole groves, while others sustained minimal damage.

Tips on Pruning – Wait!

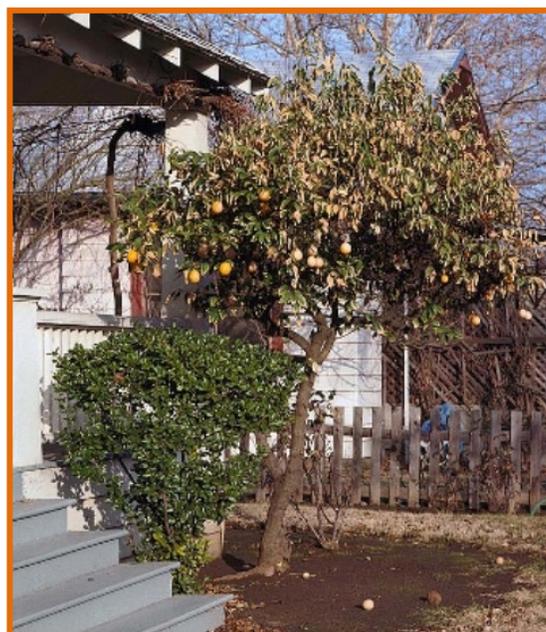
If you haven't already pruned the freeze damage from your citrus trees, then don't! Some of us get a little excited with the bare limbs and may have pruned off some good wood. You'll see trees leafing out and it's likely that you will see more dieback in the next month or two. Some growers have seen dieback on lemons even a year later. So, if you've already pruned your trees, you may need to prune again in upcoming months. Citrus advisor Neil O'Connell told growers at a meeting recently that they should wait four to six months before doing any pruning.

Tips on Spring Citrus Care

There are still a number of things you can do now. Don't fertilize damaged trees as much as you would normally. If a tree is thirty percent damaged, give it thirty percent less fertilizer. Over fertilizing may force out more new growth than the damaged tree can support. That new spring flush of growth may look good now, but if the supporting branches are damaged, those new shoots may wilt and die. Look at your trees and decide if larger branches or the trunk are exposed to the sun. You may want to whitewash exposed branches before they get sunburned. It only takes a few hours of summer sun to seriously damage exposed branches. Inexpensive white latex paint diluted 50/50 with water is all you need to use.

Examine your tree below the obvious frozen leaves and shoots and look for discoloration and splitting bark. If the bark splitting is extensive, the tree may be damaged far below what you might have initially thought. Do not paint over wounds on the tree. You could increase the possibility of additional bacterial or fungal infections.

If you have planted young trees, look carefully at the trunk. All citrus trees are grafted on to disease-resistant root stock and the swelling of the bud union where the graft was made, is easily seen. If there is damage to the lower trunk, and especially if there is damage down to the bud union, it is probably wise to take out the tree and replant. If you see fresh shoots above the bud union though, the tree may be salvageable.



When you do prune, save as much of the tree's framework as you can, but cut below all serious injury. If the damage is toward the crown of the tree, cut the tree back to a healthy lateral branch, and whitewash exposed limbs. You may also want to pinch out some of the new sprouts to slow growth, and make sure to cut out any sucker growth that is growing out below the bud union.

First a Freeze and Now a Drought

With the double whammy of the freeze and this year's drought, it's likely that we will see an increase in certain pests and diseases, so keep a close watch on your trees for new problems. Prepare your trees for the drought by watering deeply but less often. Visit the MG website <http://cetulare.ucdavis.edu> for UC Gardening and Pest Information or call the MG Offices in Tulare (684-3325) and Hanford (852-2736) ask us your gardening questions. Or visit us at our Tulare Garden Festival at the Outlet Mall on April 12 from 10 am to 2pm.

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