

BRRRRRR! IT'S COLD!

FROST DAMAGE

There are only a few times a year that the weather forecast has me open my Sunset Western Garden Book. Will bougainvillea survive 35°? 29°? And what about the Meyer Lemon I planted this year? Gardeners in the greater San Francisco Bay Area have so many options. For many of us, we plant what we love. For me, that means a dark magenta bougainvillea climbs a fence, pygmy date palms grace a tropical area and pots are filled with tender succulents. We know we are rolling the weather dice, hoping that frost either does not happen when it does occur, it is brief.

This winter has been a cold one so far in the bay area. My bougainvillea has been hit hard – it will probably survive but be less than half the size it was last summer. So far the palms are still green and my jade plants are doing fine tucked up next to the house. But it is forecast to be 26° this week and how things will turn out I will not know until late spring.

For those of us who must have these frost sensitive plants in our gardens, we can consider site selection when planting. Tender plants will do best against a wall with eastern or southern exposure. The heat absorbed by the wall will keep the area slightly warmer at night. Warm locations under larger trees also offer a bit of protection. Again, being slightly warmer will help

keep at least the roots alive, even if you end up losing most of the plant. The key thing, when looking in your frost damaged garden in winter, is to not despair. Do not prune any plant until all danger of frost has occurred – wait until late spring. Branches you thought were dead may sprout new growth and surprise you. Wait until you see the new growth, then start pruning. If a tree was heavily damaged but survived, wait a year to do heavy pruning. And if you prune out what seems dead in January, and another frost hits in February, you are likely to lose more of your plant. Frost damaged plants are going to be more susceptible to disease so keep a careful eye out for secondary issues once spring arrives. Make sure plants receive enough water and lightly fertilize.

And, if you do lose a treasured plant, you have learned a hard Bay Area gardening lesson. You might be able to have the same plant, just in a different location in your garden. Or it is time for something new, and a bit less frost sensitive.

Further on-line reading:

<http://anrcatalog.ucdavis.edu/pdf/8100.pdf> "Frost Protection for Citrus and Other Subtropicals"

Jacqueline Bruhn, Master Gardener



What can you do if frost is predicted and you are concerned about some plants?

1. Make sure your soil has adequate moisture. This will increase its ability to retain heat.
2. When frost is expected, cover sensitive plants overnight with something like an old sheet, light blanket or even newspaper. It is best to not have the covering touch the plant. Remove cover during the day.
3. The trunk of young trees can be loosely wrapped in cloth or cardboard to insulate the trunk.
4. You can use electric holiday lights to generate a little warmth especially if plants are covered or even single light bulbs in outdoor approved fixtures. Place lights at base of plant so heat can rise.