

Ask Cynthia Brian-Pruning After Freeze

Reader's Request

Dear Cynthia:

After the recent few days of 20-degree temperatures, some of my plants look dead. Should I prune them back now so that they'll recover? My garden looks really ugly.

Carol in Moraga

Hello Carol:

Brrr... I commiserate with you. My geraniums and pink bower vine suffered in this recent freeze and are now brown. They are unsightly and appear to be rotting. My designer instinct is to cut them back to improve the curb appeal. However, allowing vanity to rule my desire for beauty may destroy the entire plant.

Contrary to popular thought, after a freeze do NOT prune or cut back the frost bitten plant matter. Allow the dead leaves and branches to remain in place as an extra layer of protection from the cold. Wait until danger of frost or freeze is past in late winter or early spring to remove the dead material. Trees may drop their leaves while lemon and other citrus may drop fruit. Don't panic. This is a sign that nature is at work keeping the plant alive.

A few things you can do to protect your garden:

- Cover frost sensitive plants with sheets, tarps, plastic, or, as I do, unused dog pillow covers. Christmas lights that are turned on are a good way to provide warmth. Remove plastic when temperatures are above 55 degrees to avoid sunburn.
- Give your plants a good drink mid morning before a freeze. The water will insulate the plant, protecting it from freezing. Don't water later in the day as temperatures get cool and any moisture remaining on foliage may freeze causing more injury.
- Turn your sprinkler systems off as you don't want them watering during a freeze. The resulting damage will be severe.
- Leave the blanket of fallen leaves in your garden. If you must rake, make sure to add this leaf mulch to areas in need of protection. Don't haul leaves away or put them in your green bin. Run a lawn mover over a pile of leaves. Use this instant free gold to mulch your landscape to keep the heat in the ground.
- Wait until March to fertilize as fertilizer stimulates new growth. Tender new foliage will be quickly damaged in the cold weather.
- Move containers to a warmer location, perhaps near the perimeter of the house or under the overhang of a balcony or roof.

Don't worry. Most everything will come back in the spring and the beauty of your garden will return. In the meantime, enjoy your down time.

Stay warm and Happy Gardening to you!

Cynthia Brian

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I am available as a speaker, designer, and consultant.

Cynthia will answer one or more questions every other issue as space allows. Email your comments or questions to Cynthia@GoddessGardener.com



Freeze damaged pink bower vine on a lattice fence. It's tempting to prune back the dead leaves, but don't.

Photo Cynthia Brian