

Gardening Question and Answer

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Q When can we expect our live oak leaves to fall? We like to use them for mulch in the spring vegetable garden.

A. Some are already falling but I believe the usual “big drop” is on or about March 1. I agree they make an excellent mulch for garden plants and paths. They also make an excellent addition to the compost pile. In some neighborhoods gardeners compete for the leaves that their neighbors rake up. They are much too valuable to discard in the landfill.

Q. One good thing about the freezing temperatures, it should kill off the insects like the cucumber beetles and cabbage loopers, correct?

A. The freeze will reduce some insect and mite populations but not all of them. The bad news is that aphids, mites and other pests are masters at reproduction! When I uncovered my lime trees, I also noticed that there were several cucumber beetles sharing the heat source. To help reduce the pest populations further, spray your roses, fruit trees, and pecans with dormant oil. Watch for a 48-hour period where temperatures are forecast to be above 45 degrees. Follow the label instructions.

Q. We have anaqua growing in our backyard. We love the blooms, yellow fruit and evergreen foliage, and so do the birds. The leaves froze in the cold spell we had in early January, will it recover? Is there anything we can do to help it along?

A. It is relatively common for anaquas to defoliate when temps fall below 26 degrees for more than a few hours. It should re-leaf this spring without any permanent damage. Mexican olive is also sensitive to cold spells, it probably was not cold enough this freeze for it to die back to the roots, but it seems to happen every 10 years or so.

Q. I heard you and Dr. Parsons discussing hummingbirds still at sugar water feeders in the San Antonio area during this cold spell on your radio show last weekend. Surely it is not a good idea to leave the feeders out and encourage the birds to stay in this area over the winter?

A. It is an issue that is brought up quite often but as far as I can find, all researchers say that the decision by hummingbirds to winter in the area is not related to the availability of sugar water feeders. The wintering species are rufous hummingbirds from the far northwest of the continent that make their decisions independent of the feeders. Having access to the feeder may make it easier to survive for the winter after the decision is made.

Q. Is it too late for us to plant sweet peas in the flower garden?

A. No, I have had luck planting them up to mid-February. Obtain seed from the nursery or last year's crop. Soak the seed overnight and then plant it in full sun against a trellis. Tomato cages work fine if you do not have other trellis.