**Freeze Protection**

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In an average year our first freeze usually occurs by mid-November. It may not freeze in November this year but it is best to be prepared.

Sometime this month move your cold sensitive tropical plants into protection. Bougainvillea plumeria and purple fountain grass do not need light during the winter but they need to be protected from freezes. Oriental hibiscus, geraniums and mandevilla survive the winter better if they receive enough light to retain their foliage.

Citrus in containers such as Mexican lime and Meyer lemon can be moved into the greenhouse but it is usually easier to cover them and other citrus on evenings where low temperatures are forecast. Thirty degrees is low for the limes, lemons and grapefruit. Satsuma, kumquats and Changsha tangerines can usually survive 26 degrees. Treat avocados like Mexican lime. They are also cold sensitive.

Blankets work well to protect plants from freeze but I like the commercial covering called “plankets.” They come in round shapes that are the correct shape for covering citrus trees, especially in containers. They also have steel ringlets for a drawstring to secure the bottom of the covering to the container.

Plastic only works well if it is used as a tent or there is a cloth (blanket) between the plastic and the foliage. Remember that the area under clear plastic heats up enough during a sunny day to “fry” the foliage.

If the freezing temperatures are going to be very low, (3 degrees lower than the temperatures described above), provide a heat source under the tent or “planket.” A mechanics light, poultry light or even Christmas lights work well. Make sure you have a connection plug-in protected from the rain.

It is always a race with cold weather and tomatoes ripening in the fall. Often if the plants and fruit can survive the first freeze, there will be 2-3 weeks of mild weather for ripening before the next freeze.

At some point you may have to harvest all the full-size fruit and let it ripen in the house. Use the ripest ones first and the fruit may last for a month.

Tomatoes freeze at 32 degrees so be even more conservative with them than the sensitive citrus.

I have had great luck with cyclamen maintaining their bloom through freezing temperatures. They are always planted in sheltered locations in full shade so they aren’t subjected to the temperature extremes. If the blooms do freeze, however that may be the end of blooms for five or six weeks. The conservative strategy is to cover them at about 30 degrees to protect the bloom. One of the rectangular “plankets” or regular blankets works well. The foliage is very cold tolerant but the flowers will burn from the cold.

Don’t worry about the Cole crops, greens, onions and carrots. Beets, radishes and lettuce will sometimes have foliage from a cold wave. Pansies are safe but we can expect petunias, snapdragons, calendulas and stocks to have a bloom free period in mid-winter. They could be covered but we don’t usually bother.