

DEALING WITH DAMAGED PLANTS AND GRASS AFTER A WINTER STORM

In a typical year, landscape-loving people in Texas are getting the itch to start some spring planting and fertilizing. Just when plants should be weeks away from spring blooms, many just look dead. Even those of us with brown thumbs recognize that our plants are not okay after last week's deep freeze. So what should we do about it?

STEP #1: Be PATIENT, let nature take its course. This is especially difficult for some because we want to be as proactive and preventative as possible. However, nature knows more about its instinctive abilities than human research and science.

STEP #2: IRRIGATION AUDITS... landscapers have stressed the need for an irrigation audit due to the shallowness of irrigation lines (about 6 inches) in Texas. Irrigation systems need to remain off for the next 10 days as most, if not all, vegetation is in complete shock. Once the ground has reached temperatures in the high 50's and air temperatures are averaging 60's, irrigation is going to be slowly added to the turf and plants. However, it has been advised constantly to run the system multiple times through short intervals in order to find the broken pipes, leaking valves, cracked backflows, or stuck sprinkler heads.

STEP #3: Try to minimize foot traffic on lawns for the next two weeks. Most of the turf blades are dead; however, the root systems can be preserved and assisted by decreasing compaction.

STEP #4: Trees will show signs of frost/freeze cracks and/or splitting. Of course, the foliage was burnt which will cause early defoliation but what I noticed the most was the cracks, especially on my live oaks. The biggest concern is risk management and tree health. If there are any broken branches or dead branches, these need to be removed properly. Trees will recover from small or medium-sized cracks but not from large splits.

STEP #5: Evergreen shrubs will more than likely go through a defoliating period. The shrubs that remain vibrant green the next seven days, such as hollies, will probably not defoliate; however, all brown or grayish-green leaves will do so. Shrubs like rosemary, wax myrtles, pittosporums, oleanders, and other less cold-tolerant evergreen shrubs may experience branch dieback or total dieback down to the ground. Be patient, some of this dieback will not be produced or observed until after spring when the plant is unable to produce new foliage.

STEP #6: All perennials, no matter if they still have some green foliage will require a complete cut-back to 2-3 inches from the ground to remove all damage and/or death. Again, patience, and lean on the side of caution when pulling out native perennials until June if not sprouting new growth.

STEP #7: Palms and Tropical Plants are the most sensitive to these cold temperatures this past week. Some palm varieties may recover and produce new fronds. This is the key to the viability of all plants.. sprouting new growth. With Palms and Tropicals, all dead fronds and foliage need to be removed within the next couple of weeks.

STEP #8: Cacti and Succulents are also similar to tropical plants in regard to cold temperatures. In correlation to this similarity, all removal of black and damaged foliage should be removed promptly for promoting recovery and possible viability. Also, cacti and succulents may take even longer than perennials to sprout new growth.

STEP #9: Fruit Trees will need to be monitored for budding on branching. If the tree dies back to the main trunk, the production of the tree will be inadequate as the graft site will be compromised. If there is no budding by the mid-to-end of spring, the tree is too severely damaged or dead and should be removed or replaced.

STEP #10: Mulch, mulch, mulch, and more mulch... (3 to 4 inches at most)! These plants (minus the turf) need organic matter introduced into the soil as well as the added layer of insulation for both moisture and the cold. If your vegetation is in mulch beds, this is the time to make sure there is a minimum of 3 inches with a recommended 4 inches of mulch to promote plant recovery.

Source: *Christy Rohlf is the owner of Liberty Lawn & Landscaping Inc.*

