

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



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Norfolk Island pines are commonly grown on Galveston Island and other coastal cities along the Gulf of Mexico. Even though Norfolk Island pines sustained cold weather damage from last winter's freeze, most trees have produced new growth and can be expected to recover if given time.

Q: The branches on my Norfolk Island pine are mostly brown from the winter's freezing temperatures. Is there any hope that the tree may recover or should I have it removed?

A: The eye-catching, pyramidal symmetry and softly-textured, dark-green foliage of Norfolk Island pines growing in local landscapes

has endeared it to local gardeners since Norfolk Island pines survived all that Hurricane Ike had to dish out (i.e., saltwater and wind) in 2008.

Despite their common name, Norfolk Island pines are not true pines; they are members of a prehistoric family of conifers known as Araucariaceae. This landscape tree

acted the role of that pink bunny rabbit for it took a licking from Hurricane Ike and kept on ticking. It almost appeared that Norfolk Island pines were invigorated by the ordeal!

Based upon the recent number of telephone calls to the office about Norfolk Island pines, many homeowners are concerned about the



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prognosis of their trees after last winter's devastating freeze.

Here's how my April 8, 2009, column read: "Norfolk Island pine trees have been stellar performers over the past months since Hurricane Ike made landfall. I have been very impressed by the lack of salt-water damage sustained by these trees in areas where other trees (including live oaks) sustained extreme to lethal damage."

Even though Norfolk Island pines are remarkably salt-tolerant, they have a weak link: Very low temperatures (30 to 32 degrees Fahrenheit) can cause the growing tips to die and abort. Worse still, temperatures below 25 degrees Fahrenheit can cause severe freeze damage.

My recommendation is to wait until mid-June to make an assessment on whether to remove Norfolk Island pine trees that sustained extensive freeze injury. I also recommend pruning out any dead limbs but be sure to not prune out any portions of branches that show evidence of new growth emerging. It may require one or two years for trees to produce an acceptable level of new growth, I have seen heavily damaged trees make a decent recovery but it takes time (and patience on the part of the homeowner) for trees heavily damaged trees to recover.

Q: The fronds on my sago palm are brown and appear to be dead. Should I remove the plant or is there hope that the plant is still alive?

A: Sago palms make great focal points for flower beds and landscapes. They are also very hearty plants and can take the high heat of our summer season and coolness of our subtropical winters. Last winter's freezing temperatures impacted most sago palms.

Even so, I expect most plants will recover. Most sago palms have a single growing point at the top of the plant. Sago palms should be putting out new growth now. If your plant has not done so, it likely means that the plant did not survive the freezing weather.

If you're thinking of planting Sago Palms in your landscape be aware that palm seeds are quite toxic to pets like dogs and cats.

Q: The fronds on all my queen palms have been brown since the winter cold front. Two of the palms have produced small fronds at the very top of the plants. Will they likely survive?

A: Queen palms (*Syagrus roman-zoffiana*) are among the least cold tolerant of the palms we commonly grow in this area, and they were badly affected by temperatures in the low 20s and teens.

Freezing temperatures may kill the growing point (which means the tree is already dead or will die). Fortunately, some queen palms with totally brown fronds have managed to produce new growth and will likely do well if provided with supplemental irrigation during extended periods of dry weather conditions.

Cold damage to the trunk generally appears as spots leaking a brown fluid. These spots may dry up eventually and lead to no further damage. On occasion, these wounds can become infected with decay fungi leading to rotten areas. If the trunk and growing point are OK, the tree will recover.

Unfortunately, there is nothing to be done after freeze damage has occurred. It is now up to the palm tree. If the growing point at the top of the tree survived, the trees generally recover.

We need to be very patient with damaged palms. A sign that a palm is dead is when the spear leaf in the center of a palm canopy can be pulled out of the bud or heart. Palms usually start their season's growth long after other shrubs and trees start their spring growth flushes. If palms do start regrowth by early summer, it is possible that the new, emerging fronds will be misshapen.

If you want to replace cold-damaged palms this year, plan to plant in early summer. In contrast to most landscape trees, palms should be planted at the hotter times of the year. Root growth on palms is different than other landscape plants. Extensive root growth occurs in June, July and August which is the time of the year when many other plants are not growing new roots.

