

Freeze Damage FAQs

Winter Storm Uri inflicted widespread freezing damage to our landscapes. Weather data shows that Galveston Island endured approximately 16 consecutive hours of a hard freeze (below 25 degrees). League City endured approximately 35 consecutive hours. Here are some questions that homeowners are asking:

Q: It's been over two months since our big freeze, and some of my shrubs and trees have still not shown signs of life. What can I do?

Ultimately, we are all in the same boat of waiting and seeing what makes it and what doesn't. A number of factors can make outcomes vary across the area, including local temperature, location of planting, moisture at freeze, mulch or protection, health of the plant prior to freeze and general hardiness.

Damage to woody plants may take longer to show up, and it is still possible that not all branches are dead. Once new growth appears, it can be pruned above those points.

Scraping the bark with your fingernail will reveal the circulatory tissue just below the bark. If your nail cannot penetrate, use a sharp knife. Healthy, functioning tissue should be a greenish color. Cold damaged tissue will be brown or black. Start checking higher in the plant and work down towards the base of the plant.

Some plants may not show signs of life until later in the growing season, so if you want to keep the plant, we advise patience.

Q: What about my citrus?

Not all freeze injury in citrus shows up quickly. Texas AgriLife Extension advises not pruning until May, if no signs of life are appearing. Also, due to demand you may not find trees available if you're looking for a specific variety. For those trees showing no signs of life, we advise patience. Your tree may surprise you.

Citrus trees are usually grafted, meaning a desired variety is attached to a rootstock more suited to our soils. This rootstock is normally more vigorous than the desired variety on top. Always remove the sprouts coming from below the graft union. Here is a website about it:

<https://www.lsuagcenter.com/MCMS/RelatedFiles/%7B41E75CEB-5F1E-4378-A48B-DE7C63502650%7D/Citrus-Sprouting-Rootstock.pdf>

For those trees which are showing signs of growth--freeze-injured citrus need good water and fertilizer to restore foliage or regrow the canopy. For large trees, rates of fertilizer should be moderate if extensive canopy dieback occurred, because in the absence of fruiting, vegetative growth can be rampant.

Use balanced fertilizer and micronutrients to replenish nutrient reserves. Excessive fertilizer, especially late in the spring or early summer, will cause strong flushes of growth that are targeted by insects.

If worse comes to worse and you do lose some of the plants in your garden, don't think of it as a tragedy but as an opportunity. When the dead plants are removed, we will have open areas available, perhaps ready for a new plant. Think about that, and the loss might not seem so bad.