

# 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:

## How do I know if my plant has been damaged?

Different plants will show different damage symptoms. Generally speaking discoloration, softening and becoming dry and brittle are all signs of damage. Herbaceous plants like impatiens or begonias may collapse and become mushy.

With more woody plants, scraping the bark with your fingernail will reveal the circulatory tissue just below the bark. Healthy, functioning tissue should be a pale, creamy color. Cold damaged tissue will be brown or black.

With deciduous plants, still dormant and leafless, you don't have any good way of knowing how much of the plant was damaged unless you scrape the bark. Wait until the new buds begin to swell up and emerge from under the surface of the stem. Once the new buds or growth appears, prune off any obviously dead, dry plant tissue.

## Can I remove the damaged portions?

This soon after the freeze, you need to just wait and see. Prune off damaged tissue now, and you're simply exposing a new part of the plant to damage which might occur from diseases, or late frosts or freezes.

## What if I only remove the damaged tips?

New growth and the tips of stems are the most sensitive to frost damage. It's tempting to just remove it as a way to tidy up for freeze recovery, but leave this tissue alone. Once the plant begins to grow out of this damage you'll be better able to gauge where to prune.

## So when can I begin to prune damaged plants?

For totally collapsed, herbaceous plants, check within the next week or so to see if there is any green, whole tissue remaining. As the damaged parts of the plant show more effects, this will become easier. If there is living tissue remaining, remove the damaged, mushy portions to reduce the spread of disease. Try not to cut into living plant tissue.

For other plants, the best method is to wait until plants begin to sprout new growth. This will help you be more certain where to prune.

## **Should I fertilize?**

Even if it's been a while since you fertilized your perennial landscape plants, do not start fertilizing cold-stressed plants until they have resumed active growth in the spring. The use of fertilizer now may stimulate new growth, which is very susceptible to cold injury. Also, fertilizer salts may cause further injury to stressed root systems.

## **My St. Augustine lawn has turned totally brown. What do I do?**

This is a normal part of winter dormancy. When the days become longer and temperatures start to warm up in the spring, the growing points will become active, bringing green growth to the lawn again. Do not fertilize your lawn in the winter to try to green it up after a freeze—wait for the natural cycle of events to occur in the springtime. Fertilizing after a freeze will do more harm to your lawn than waiting for spring green-up. Do not apply a weed and feed product for pre emergence weed control. Lawns generally do not require as much irrigation during winter months, so scale back your irrigation systems. You will not need to mow for some time; when you do need to mow again, be sure to cut at the highest recommended height. Do not "scalp" the lawn, as this makes it less able to recover from freeze damage. Make sure your mower blades are sharp.

How can you tell if your grass has truly succumbed to a winter freeze or if it is only dormant? One way is to cut small plugs of the grass (with roots and shoots attached) and plant them in a pot, put it in a warm spot with natural sunlight and see if the grass begins to grow.

What about weeds? While you're waiting for signs of lawn recovery, the best method is to pull weeds by hand. If this method is not feasible, apply spot treatments of appropriate herbicides.

If your lawn does not recover come springtime, remove the decayed vegetation from the affected areas and replace. It is possible that not all of your lawn will be affected; perhaps just those areas that were most exposed to the cold temperatures.

## **What about my citrus trees?**

In citrus, if hardier growth (such as twigs or wood) has not been seriously damaged, it is normal for dead leaves to be rapidly shed. If the frost-killed leaves remain on the plant, this is an indication that twigs or branches have been seriously damaged. To be positive, scrape the bark

as described above. If larger branches or the trunk of a tree sustain cold damage, the bark will split and dead patches of curled, dry bark may appear.

If a young citrus tree has been killed nearly to the ground, inspect it closely to determine if the damage extends below the graft union. Again, scraping the bark can help determine this. The graft union is the junction where the fruit-producing part of the tree was grafted onto the rootstock. If new growth comes only from the rootstock, the tree will no longer be true to the type you originally planted and will usually be unproductive.

## **What about palm trees?**

With palms, new growth appears as a green spear coming out of the bud, which is the growing part at the top of the palm. If the bud dies, the palm dies. Unfortunately the base of the spear leaf is one of the least cold hardy parts of a palm.

If you can reach the spear, give it a tug. If it pulls out easily chances are your bud has died. If it seems secure, and/or if there's still green in the canopy, there's hope.

Don't prune now, instead, spray the bud with a copper-based fungicide and again in 10 days. Many times the weakened portion of the spear leaf is affected by bacteria and fungi present in the environment.

Many cycads (sago palms) can appear to be completely brown following freezing weather, although if you examine the petioles (frond stalks) near the base you may spot some green coloration, which could be a good sign for recovery.

If the trunk and leaf crown are hard wood, it should recover. If the trunk turns soft, your sago might be damaged beyond recovery.

As weather warms up in spring you can remove the dead portions.

## **Should I remove plants which have tops which look dead?**

Plants can surprise you. It may take until mid-summer for any growth to emerge, but if the plant is worth it to you, it will pay to wait. Scraping the bark with your fingernail, as described above, may help you determine whether there is circulation still active in the plant.

As stated above, give your plants time to stabilize. Once all danger of frosts and freezes has passed, it is okay to remove totally dead, dry plant tissue.

One common phrase coming out of Texas A&M right now is "learn to love ugly". Weather can be a great equalizer. All of our yards are sporting the "brown look" right now, which can make it easier to go with the flow, at least at the present time. Plants will regrow appropriately. Our landscapes will look green again.

Our Extension Agents have been busy assessing plant damage and offering advice. Here are some videos:

Brazoria County: <https://fb.watch/3SmCBB4A4E/>

Harris County: <https://fb.watch/3SmHYNqmtK/>