

“Assessing the Damage”
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Assessing the extent of damage from November’s freeze may take some time. Temperatures in the mid-teens can seriously damage plants, more so when preceded by mild fall weather. Not yet hardened for winter, cell walls of every plant part (roots, leaves, stems, and blooms) may rupture beyond repair when frozen and thawed. Yet plants often survive and recover. So what’s a gardener to do? From the bottom up, here’s what to consider.

Roots, while the least cold hardy plant part, usually survive in our region due to the insulating properties of soil and snow. Unless soils freeze solid, roots, crowns, and other underground parts such as bulbs, corms, and rhizomes remain alive, ready to sprout in warm weather. Strategy when above ground structures are dead beyond doubt...wait until late spring for new growth at the base.

Assume for now that branches and trunks of woody plants are alive. In early spring, buds should produce new stems and leaves. Young, more tender shoots from this year’s growth may have succumbed. But be patient. Don’t prune yet. Dead parts announce themselves more clearly when they fail to leaf out or turn grey/black in spring. When in doubt, scrape away the thin outer layer from a stem to see if it is greenish-white and therefore alive underneath. Another indication of live tissue is that the cut end of a stem (the one you cut back to a bud) will look greenish, not deadish grey.

Somewhat hardy plants such as hydrangeas, fuchsias, hebes, and a host of others are hard to evaluate now. Leaving questionable plants untouched provides some protecting insulation from further freezes this winter. Wait until danger of frost has passed before cutting back to live growth or the ground. It is probably less damaging to leave them be until winter ends.

I take heart. Lettuce and winter greens survived under a blanket of snow in my garden. And spaces left by lost plants beg to be filled with hardier varieties. Check out these articles for more on winter damage:

<http://gardening.wsu.edu/column/12-17-00.htm>

http://www.bbc.co.uk/gardening/basics/weather_coldweather.shtml

Jefferson County Master Gardener plant clinics will open again in February 2011; exact dates and times will be provided in January. Master Gardener training starts in January. Call Kathy at 360-301-4938 or details.