Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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With the previous sub-freezing temperatures we experienced, it is difficult to predict which landscape plants may have been damaged or even killed as of yet. Winter injury problems will begin to manifest themselves slowly in the spring and continue to show up on into the summer months. It is definitely something to consider when planning this year's garden.

Climates in the garden differ. Freezing temperatures alone are not the only factor in low-temperature plant damage. Each garden has "warm" and "cold" areas. For example, a windy exposed north hill offers less protection than a southwest corner, sheltered by a wall. A garden near water will have a more moderate climate than a garden at a high elevation without proximity to water. These kinds of microclimates influence how freezing temperatures impact plants.

Another thing to consider when surveying for landscape damage is each plant's genetic make-up. The response of a particular plant to cold will depend on its hardiness. For instance, many junipers and pines endure hard freezes without trouble, while less hardy shrubs, such as escallonia, pittosporum and raphiolepis can suffer when temperatures drop significantly below freezing.

Certain parts of plants freeze more often than others. You will see buds damaged more often than stems. Loss of spring flowering is a common symptom of freeze damage. This results from buds being partly or fully frozen. Our rhododendrons are often affected this way. Buds, when only partially frozen, may unfold unevenly and look disfigured. The good news is that the plant can recover and flower normally in subsequent seasons, if not otherwise injured. So don't give up on it yet!

Bark, particularly on newly planted trees and shrubs, can split if sun strikes when frozen. Bark splits, especially on the southwest side where sun hits, are a common problem of newly installed trees. You can help prevent this by wrapping the trunks of young trees through their first full growing season. Graft unions are also sensitive to cold injury.

Roots, when insulated by the ground around your plants, should survive just fine, but roots exposed to freezing air while in a container are at risk. Root systems don't recover from cold injury. So plants in containers are especially prone to being killed in hard freezes. Plants, such as pine, that would survive a hard freeze in the ground, can be severely injured or killed in a container. In addition, shallow root systems are more vulnerable than deep, established ones.

When deciding if a plant has been killed, be patient. Symptoms of winter injury may take months to show up. For instance, a plant may start out in spring looking totally dead, but then sprout up from the roots later. Conversely, a plant may seem to be doing fine until a spell of really hot weather puts stress on the roots. If a plant has been injured, be sure it gets proper watering during summer. Even plants adapted to dry summer conditions will need water when recovering from freeze damage. Cover roots with about two inches of a porous organic mulch and fertilize lightly once plants begin to grow.

When doing restorative pruning on damaged plants, prune out only dead wood. Check for live wood by gently scraping through a tiny section of bark with a knife or your fingernail. Dead cambium tissue is brown, dark brown or even soggy, while live tissue will appear white or green. Start at the outer branch tips and work down toward the trunk. Many times, younger twigs may be dead while older wood remains alive.

As you can see, winter injury to plants depends on many variables. As you observe your plants, keep notes, and consider replacing any that do die with plants that are more hardy in our area.

This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.