
ICE FREEZE PLANT & TREE CARE GUIDE

A comprehensive playbook for protecting landscapes in warmer climates

Why Freezes Hit Hard

Landscapes acclimated to warmth are vulnerable to sudden cold snaps. Damage occurs via two main mechanisms:

- 1. Cellular Rupture:** Rapid temperature drops cause water inside plant cells to crystallize and expand, bursting the cell walls.
- 2. Desiccation:** Cold wind strips moisture from leaves and bark faster than roots can replace it, essentially freeze-drying the plant.





PHASE 1: PREPARATION

1. Vulnerable Pots: Move Indoors

Start with what you can protect quickly.



- ✓ If you can lift it, **move it inside.**
- ✓ A garage, laundry room, or even a covered patio corner is dramatically warmer than open air.
- ✓ Prioritize tropicals, citrus, and succulents.

2. Can't Move Them Inside?

The Huddle Method

Cluster pots together and push them against the warmest exterior wall of your home (usually South or West facing).

The radiant heat from the home's structure and the collective mass of the soil helps moderate the temperature drop.



3. The "Heat Tent" Concept

Wrong Way: Wrapping the plant like a lollipop. This isolates the leaves from the ground's warmth.

Right Way: Drape the cover over the plant so it reaches the ground on all sides. Secure it with bricks or staples.

This traps the heat rising from the soil, creating a microclimate inside the tent.



4. Covering Materials: Cloth vs. Plastic

✓ **BEST: Frost Cloth**

Breathable specialized fabric that traps heat but allows moisture to escape. Sheets and blankets work in a pinch.

⚠ **RISK: Plastic**

Plastic touching leaves transmits cold instantly ("contact burn"). If using plastic, use a frame to keep it off foliage.

5. Water: The Thermal Battery



- ✓ **Moist soil holds heat** longer than dry soil.
- ✓ Water deeply early in the day *before* the freeze arrives.
- ✓ This insulates the roots and helps the plant uptake water to combat drying winds.

Note: If the ground is already soaked from rain, skip this step to avoid root rot.

6. Mulch for Root Insulation

Roots are the plant's survival engine. If the roots die, the plant is lost.

- ✓ Add a 2-3 inch layer of mulch around shrubs and perennials.
- ✓ **Important:** Keep mulch pulled back a few inches from the trunk flare.
- ✓ This acts like a heavy wool blanket for the soil.



7. Wrapping Young Trees

Young trees and thin-barked species (Citrus, Crape Myrtle) are prone to bark splitting.

The Technique

Wrap the trunk with breathable tree wrap, burlap, or even cardboard from the base up to the first branches.



8. Protect Irrigation Systems

A short hard freeze can burst exposed pipes and expensive backflow preventers.

- ✓ Turn off the controller.
- ✓ Drain the system if possible.
- ✓ **Insulate:** Wrap exposed pipes and backflow devices with insulation tape, towels, or an insulated cover.

IE Class Designations

CLASS II





PHASE 2: DURING THE FREEZE

9. Emergency: It's Late, Now What?

Don't Panic. Act Fast.

If temperatures are dropping and you didn't prep, late is better than never.

- ✓ Throw a sheet, blanket, or tarp over sensitive plants **now**.
- ✓ Weigh down the corners with rocks or pots.
- ✓ You are trying to trap whatever residual ground heat is left.

10. Do Not Shake Ice Off

CRITICAL WARNING

Frozen branches are as brittle as glass.

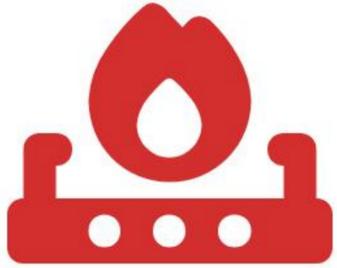
Shaking or hitting limbs to remove ice can cause them to snap instantly, tearing the bark and wounding the tree.

Let it melt naturally.



11. Avoid Artificial Heat

Resist the urge to use hair dryers, hot water, or outdoor heaters on plants.



- **⚠ Thermal Shock:** Rapid warming ruptures frozen cells.
- **⚠ Safety Hazard:** Electrical heaters in wet/icy conditions are a fire and shock risk.

12. The Fertilizer Trap

Do Not Feed Plants During Freeze

Fertilizer sends a signal to "grow." New growth is tender and packed with water.

Pushing growth during a freeze guarantees severe damage. Plants need to be dormant to survive cold.

13. Human Safety First

-  **Stay Out From Under Trees:** Ice accumulation adds massive weight. Large limbs can snap silently and fall without warning.
-  **Watch for Power Lines:** Ice-laden branches sagging onto lines are a major electrocution and fire hazard. Stay far away.



WHAT NOT TO DO: COMMON MISTAKES

14. Mistake: Panic Pruning



Don't Cut Yet

Dead-looking foliage might still be protecting live buds underneath. Pruning immediately after a freeze exposes fresh green tissue to the cold, worsening the dieback.

15. Mistake: The "Lollipop" Wrap

Wrapping just the top of a tree or bush like a lollipop provides almost no protection.

Why it fails: The heat source is the ground. Tying the cover around the trunk cuts off the heat flow. The cover *must* capture the ground.

16. Mistake: Salts & Deicers

-  **Chemical Burn:** Salt products used on driveways can wash into plant beds.
-  **Root Damage:** Salt dehydrates roots and kills beneficial soil microbes.
-  **Alternative:** Use sand or kitty litter for traction near garden beds.



PHASE 3: RECOVERY

17. Uncovering Protocol

- **✓ Morning Removal:** Uncover plants once temperatures rise above freezing.
- **✓ Sun & Air:** Plants need light and airflow to recover. Do not leave them covered for days.
- **✓ Re-Cover if Needed:** If another freeze is forecasted for the night, cover them again in the late afternoon.

18. Diagnosis: The Scratch Test

Leaves may turn black or mushy. This is normal freeze burn.

Is it dead?

Scratch a small twig with your fingernail. **Green** underneath means it's alive. **Brown/Brittle** means dead.



19. Recovery Watering

Check soil moisture before acting.

If Dry:

Give plants a moderate drink to help rehydrate tissues once the thaw begins.

If Wet:

Do NOT water. Soggy, cold soil prevents roots from breathing and causes rot.

20. The Waiting Game

Wait. Then wait some more.

For many plants (Hibiscus, Palms, Lantana), the true extent of damage won't be visible for weeks.

Prune only when you see new growth emerging (green buds) so you know exactly where the live wood begins.



Arborist On Demand

For professional tree risk assessment, storm safety evaluation, and plant health care guidance.

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