

Big Freeze Aftermath: Check Your Pipes and Plants

By Brad Weir, SAWS Gardenstyle San Antonio

This week's valentine vortex will be long remembered, with Texas' lowest temperatures in 40 years: a veritable gut punch to those who forget how far local weather can run off the rails.



First things first, damage to pipes won't become apparent until temperatures warm up. So if you suspect a leak, remember you can use your water meter to confirm it. If your meter is equipped with a water flow sensor, leaks may be detected even sooner.

Casualties in the landscape will be widespread, especially if you have non-native plants. Palms, in particular, are notoriously difficult to protect in cold weather, and the tallest fan, date and feather palms are some of the most vulnerable to extreme cold. Sago palms, on the other hand, will normally recover (they survived the dinosaurs!) though they may require some pruning and will take months to regrow damaged leaves.

Woody plants are tricky since these can take time to assess. Oleander, esperanza, firebush and poinciana are good examples; some years they hang on all winter and then get wiped out in a single cold night. Many semi-tropical plants like those previously mentioned will be suddenly dropping leaves after the recent single-digit temps.

A few will have to regrow from the roots, which is expected every few years from a plant like oleander or Mexican olive. But for many citrus trees, sometimes the graft itself is lost, and all that'll be left is rootstock. The strongest citrus against the freeze are Chang-Sha tangerine and the Moi Satsuma mandarin hybrids, 'Arctic Frost' and 'Orange Frost'.

Trees can be some of the toughest losses in the landscape. If you do end up having to replant, stick with natives wherever possible since they rarely, if ever, die from freeze.

Most of the recommended water-saver perennials can claw their way back from the roots when they have to, even after their tops have frozen off. Remember this when it comes to agapanthus, philodendron, and even some cactus may appear to have melted into brown mush.

On the bright side: Your pruning has been done for you! Most of these were ready to be pruned next month and spring back from the roots anyway.