

## Caring for Freeze-Damaged Landscape Plants

### What Homeowners Should Do After a Cold Event

Recent record-low temperatures have caused freeze injury to many landscape plants throughout Central and South Florida. Damage may appear quickly in some species, while in others it can take several days, weeks, or even months (in some palm species) for symptoms to fully develop. Browning foliage, wilted stems, and blackened tissue are common responses to cold stress. While the instinct may be to immediately trim away damaged material, patience is one of the most important steps homeowners can take to support plant recovery.



#### Resist the Urge to Prune Immediately

It is strongly recommended to delay pruning following freeze injury. Damaged branches and stems require time for the full progression of tissue decline to become apparent. Early pruning can remove plant parts that might otherwise recover, and it may also stimulate new growth prematurely that could be vulnerable if additional cold weather occurs. Additionally, dead or damaged plant tissue can provide insulation for underlying living tissue, helping protect it from additional cold events. Waiting allows you to accurately assess the extent of injury and make more informed pruning decisions.

#### Evaluating Survival Potential

As temperatures rise and plants resume active growth, homeowners can assess stem viability through a simple inspection. Lightly scratch the outer bark of a stem with a fingernail or small tool. Green, moist tissue beneath the bark indicates living tissue, while brown, dry tissue indicates dead tissue. This assessment can be performed progressively down the stem toward the soil line. If no living tissue is present anywhere along the stem, the plant will likely not recover. However, if live tissue is present, regrowth is possible.



Green tissue under the bark of this Hibiscus is a good indication that this branch will survive and produce new growth.



Brown tissue beneath the bark of this Ixora indicates that the branch is dead. Wait to see if any new growth emerges lower in the canopy before choosing where to make pruning cuts.

## **When to Prune**

The best time to prune freeze-damaged plants is after new growth begins emerging from live branches. New shoots clearly identify which parts of the plant are alive and which are not. At that point, remove branches that show no new growth and cut back to healthy, living tissue. Avoid excessive pruning beyond what is necessary to remove dead material. This approach minimizes unnecessary stress on the plant and promotes stronger recovery.

## **Understanding the Risk of Tropical Landscapes**

Many Florida landscapes feature colorful tropical and subtropical plant species valued for their visual impact within the overall plant palette. However, these plants are inherently sensitive to cold temperatures. Periodic freeze events are a natural risk, and damage is an unavoidable tradeoff when selecting species adapted to warmer environments. Landscape design always involves balancing aesthetic goals with environmental resilience. While freezes of this magnitude are uncommon, they serve as a reminder that plant selection influences long-term risk exposure.