FREEZE FACTS

Suggestions from our experts:

Mark Dimmitt

1. Is this the new normal? One of the characteristics of climate warming is greater instability, i.e., more extreme events. So we can expect more droughts AND more floods; more deep freezes AND more heat waves. For that reason, don't expect tropical species to be invading from the south any time soon, or expect to plant adeniums in the ground in this century.

2. Frozen tissues usually do not introduce rot into undamaged tissues. So I do nothing until spring, when I can see the extent of the damage and prune off only what is necessary. Moreover, you can't tell what's really dead unless you know the response of each particular species. Many plants turn mushy and droopy after a freeze, but recover. I've seen octopus agave and red squill freeze solid and survive if the frozen tissue is allowed to thaw. If you move the leaves, they will shatter. Some of my prickly pears turned translucent and drooped, but after a few days they are perking up again. Other prickly pears are disintegrating and some other cacti are either melting down or mummifying.

3. Don't prune back those ugly black shrubs to tidy up your landscape. The dead stems are insulating any live tissue in the interior. If you cut back your hibiscus and lantanas after the December freeze, the more recent one would have inflicted even more damage.

4. To prepare for a cold winter in advance: Succulents tolerate lower temperatures if they are dehydrated. That's because less water means more concentrated electrolytes that lower the freezing temperature of the tissue. The opposite is true of cold-hardy woody plants, at least in more frigid climates. Hardy non-succulents can tolerate being frozen, but when water is not moving through the tissues, they can be killed by dehydration. So they do better if they go into a hard freeze well hydrated.

5. Tender tropicals like adeniums are less likely to rot after freezing if they are kept warm and dry until spring. Cold will keep them dormant and they won't be able to wall off any rot that may start. Adeniums rarely rot from the top down after freezing, and the roots rarely rot if they are dry. If rot does appear, cut it away with a sterile knife until you see clean tissue that is not discolored, and treat the cut with dusting sulfur or 5-10% bleach.