

Spring Freezes and Landscape Damage

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Last week, the tristate experienced overnight temperatures in the low to mid 20s several times. Normally, that would not be unexpected for early March. However, we've had abnormally high temperatures (into the 60s) throughout February. This warm weather brought most landscape and fruiting plants out of dormancy. In my travels during the week before the freeze, I saw numerous species of plants breaking bud, leafing out, and even in full bloom.

As I write this, it is still too early for me to tell what the actual outcome will be for this season's ornamentals and fruit crops. A lot depends on the stage of development of your plants, and how cold it got last week at your property. And, of course, what future weather events occur. However, here's a few generalities that I feel safe sharing:

- * Roses were leafing out when the first freezes hit. The exposed leaves may turn brown and die, but new foliage will emerge soon. Roses bloom on new growth, and there's still plenty of time for new growth to emerge.

- * Bulbs and perennials were in various stages of development. Those in full bloom, like daffodils, might see a more rapid loss of the flowers than usual. There may be some minor leaf injury on daylilies and other perennials that were leafing out. However, the bulbs themselves are insulated by several inches of soil, and this soil had warmed up quite a bit due to all the warm weather of February and early March. I expect no long term damage.

- * Strawberries were not very far along, according to some of local farmers. While the plants are pretty hardy, the blooms could be easily damaged. Right now, we should have a good crop, but again, it all depends on what the future brings.

- * Fruit trees: Peaches were in the pink stage at local orchards, but they can handle temperatures as low as 25 degrees without a noticeable loss of buds.

Gardeners should be watchful of local weather reports. Frost can occur on plants even at temperatures above 32 degrees; all but the most tender of plants should be able to withstand this. Freezes occur when the temperature drops below 32 degrees, but this doesn't automatically mean damage will occur.

Be prepared to cover sensitive plants with a sheet or light blanket when a freeze warning is issued. The sheet needs to touch the ground, as it is trapping the heat being

radiated up from the soil. Low growing plants, like strawberries, should be covered with 6 to 8 inches of straw, or 3 to 4 inches of shredded leaves. The base of rose bushes should definitely be covered with mulch up above the graft union.

For more information on protecting your plants from freezes, please contact the Purdue Extension Service. As I write this, our phones are out of service again, so please email me at LCaplan@purdue.edu.