

Caring for freeze-damaged citrus trees

Recently we received several freezes that resulted in cold damage to some of our local citrus trees.

Citrus trees are evergreen, not deciduous, and never become fully dormant. As a result, they cannot withstand extremely low temperatures as well as many deciduous trees that are better prepared to handle colder weather.

Because new growth is more susceptible to freeze damage, do not do anything to stimulate new growth during fall and winter. For this reason, it's best to not prune or fertilize citrus trees during fall and winter. Fertilizing your lawn during fall and winter may not only be damaging to your lawn but it can potentially cause cold injury to your citrus trees, as well. The roots on trees (including citrus) extend two to three times beyond the tree's branches. With most home citrus, this places the citrus tree roots out into the lawn. Tree roots in the lawn are shallow. So any late applications of lawn fertilizer will impact your citrus trees as well. Your lawn and citrus needs ample time to use the fertilizer but yet still have time to go dormant before cold weather arrives.

Leaves on a freeze-damaged citrus tree will be hard and brittle. If freeze damage is severe, the leaves will collapse, dry out and fall from the tree. It's normal for leaves to take on a wilted or drooping appearance during periods of low temperatures. Don't confuse this with freeze damage. Frozen leaves will not be wilted – they will be hard and brittle.

Freeze damage can also cause the trunk and larger branches to split and the bark to become loose. Twigs and branches may continue to die for up to two years following a severe freeze.

Unless the soil becomes dry, be careful to not water cold injured citrus trees during warm periods that often follow freezes. This will delay the tree's growth and keep the tree in a more dormant state. Later on, if you see that the damaged tree is putting on new growth, it's okay to give it a little water.

Delay pruning of damaged limbs until late spring or summer because it's difficult to determine the extent of damage until spring growth takes place. Pruning also may encourage new tender growth during the cold season.

If it looks like you've lost half the tree in a freeze, you'll only need to apply about half as much fertilizer. If you have the situation where many leaves were lost but twigs and branches were not injured, you'll need to slightly increase the amount of fertilizer. Fertilization should begin after new growth has occurred come spring. It's a good idea to make frequent light applications rather than one heavy application.