



What to do for a Freeze/Thaw

BEFORE A FREEZE

Make sure pots and plantings are watered well before the freeze hits. Dry plants are more susceptible to freeze damage. Pay special attention to beds and pots under trees or eaves.

Cover tender plants with burlap, floating row cover, a pop-up cloche, or even an old blanket or sheet. Do not use plastic, and make sure the material goes all the way to the ground.

If containers can easily be moved, tuck them into your garage or garden shed, or at least move them up against your house. Because the ground itself provides some insulation, a plant in a container is more exposed, and therefore more tender, than the same plant in the ground. We generally estimate the difference in frost-hardiness to be about 20 degrees Fahrenheit—two full plant zones. For example, a plant that is considered hardy to 0°F may suffer damage at 20°F if it's in an exposed container. So be ready to give your container plants extra protection.

Plants exposed to wind are also more vulnerable than plants in sheltered locations and may need additional protection.

You may see bulbs pushing foliage out of the ground. This is generally not a concern. If it snows, that will give them protection. If you are really concerned, a light mulch would be fine (but remove it in the spring).

Don't prune when it's freezing, and avoid planting until temperatures moderate.

Snow is a mixed blessing. Snow will provide insulation for your plants, which can help them survive the cold. However, a heavy snowfall can also break branches, particularly if the snow is wet. If it's possible to do so, brushing off some of the snow can protect your plants from splitting and breakage. Pop-up cloches can protect smaller plants from snow damage as well as from cold.

WHEN IT THAWS

After a severe winter storm with snow, ice, and freezing temperatures, perhaps followed by flooding and/or wind, gardeners are likely to see some plant damage. This is a good time to have a professional arborist come take a look at your trees and assess how well they weathered the winter. At the least, get out in the yard yourself and take a look around. Some problems will be readily apparent; some may not show up until later in the year.

Look for outright breakage: Heavy snow loads, ice, and wind can cause a lot of breakage, especially in trees. Prune out any obvious breaks, cutting stubs back to the branch collar. Where ragged strips have been torn from trunks, clean up these areas so that the bark is firmly attached to the tree. These wounds will heal fastest when the area to be repaired is spindle-shaped (round sides, pointy at the top and bottom—think of the shape of natural knots on a tree).

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Look for dieback. It may appear right away, or you might see it after spring hits and new growth starts. Wait to do anything until you have a clear picture. Remedies will range from corrective pruning to plant removal.

Splaying or "snow wedging" can occur when heavy, wet snow or ice builds up on conifers such as pyramidalis; the heavy snow can cause a wedge that causes upright branches to splay outward. Usually, tying the plant with green stretch ties will correct the problem. Sometimes you can prune out a splayed branch and allow the area to fill in. (This can take several years.) Severe cases may require plant replacement.

Freeze damage can brown leaves on broadleaf evergreens such as camellias. You can remove the affected leaves or prune off those branches if you want. The brown leaves will not recover, but new growth should emerge as the weather warms.

Root heaving can happen when soil gets wet enough and/or snow loads heavy enough that plants begin to tip. This can happen especially with young trees that haven't yet established a good wide root structure. Plants that do this need to be "replanted". Get the roots firmly back into the ground, inspecting them first for breaks or damage that may need to be pruned out. Stake the plants as necessary.

These are probably the most common problems that you may see. Other unique situations may happen. Sky's staff can help you find a solution for your circumstances.