

Resurrection or Replacement?

While the cold snap we had this winter broke records, it really didn't last very long and that makes it very different than the cold spell that occurred in 1971. Despite the short duration, the cold did a lot of damage to shrubs and trees.

Cheryl Kent, our county extension agent, says that the plants that seem to be damaged most are:

- Trees: Deodar cedar and crape myrtles were among the most affected although we still need to wait to see how the crape myrtles fared.
- Shrubs: rosemary, Indian hawthorn, cherry sage, Spanish broom, photinia, oleander, wax leaf privet, and pyracantha were most damaged.
- Grasses: bamboos were also damaged although I have a *Fargesia* variety that's cold hardy and came out looking great.
- Cacti: Agaves, some prickly pears, and most palms got mushy.
- Vines: Lady Banks roses were heavily damaged.

Not surprisingly the majority of these plants aren't native to Albuquerque or even to the U.S.

Some of the damaged plants may be showing signs of life in the lower branches. You can decide to keep them and let them renew themselves from the roots or, if you don't want to wait, you can shovel prune them (cut the roots in a circle around the trunk) and replace them. Generally, - you can tell if a plant is alive by stripping off a small section of bark with your fingernail. If you see green below the bark, it's alive. Another test is to bend a twig or branch and if it snaps off, it's dead. If it's alive it should be flexible. But just because a branch is dead doesn't mean the whole plant is lost, so we've been recommending that you wait until the middle of May. If the plant doesn't come back from the roots by then, it's probably toast. Remember that vitex, desert willow, and a few other plants are normally late to leaf out.

For many people the loss of a mature plant is sad, and while I hate to lose large ones I always consider a dead plant as an opportunity to try out a new one. I think the nurseries will be doing a booming business this year. And while you can buy an exact replacement of the plant, you have an opportunity to pick something more appropriate to our climate.

So how do you choose a new plant? You need to read and understand what's on the label. I wrote a previous article that goes into much more detail about how to choose a plant, but the key point related to cold is to know the hardiness zone the plant can handle. First you need to know that Albuquerque is in USDA hardiness zone 7a which means the **average** low temperature range for us is from 5 to 10 degrees F. Note the word average since this year we were anything but average. Then on the plant label, if it's a perennial, it should list the range of zones the plant is known to handle e.g. zones 5-8. Anything with a lower number than 7 is cold hardy north of here. Anything with a higher number than 7 may not be cold hardy here. I say "may" because in the right situation plants can be fooled into thinking

it's not really so cold. I have a prostrate rosemary plant which is tender here even in average years and it made it through this winter. It's on the top of my herb spiral, surrounded by rock, and on the west side of the house. Rock holds daytime heat and provides it to the plant overnight. Western exposure didn't hurt since it gets hotter on the western side of my house.

If you'd rather try to renew an existing damaged plant, wait until mid-May and then cut off the dead branches. Hopefully new branches will grow from the roots. To temporarily fill in the space left empty, try adding a few pots of colorful flowers. Speaking of pots – I lost everything in my pots – nothing survived regardless of hardiness. It was just too cold for the plant roots.

Some plants that you might consider as replacements include: curl leaf mahogany or the 'Arp' variety for rosemary; moonlight (scotch) broom for Spanish broom; a hardy climbing rose for Lady Banks; Arizona rosewood or western sand cherry for Indian hawthorn; red barberry for pyracantha; Korean, Persian, or Chinese lilac for crape myrtle; Western sand cherry for photinia; and Furman's red variety of cherry sage. Choose Parry's or Utah varieties for the most cold hardy agaves. And for any plant, knowing the source of the seed is important – did it come from plants around Las Cruces or El Paso or did it come from Raton? You can guess which one would be more cold tolerant!

The safe date for last freeze in Albuquerque is around the last week of April; Cinco de Mayo for those in the Valley. If a freeze is predicted and you want to protect your plants, try covering them with a cloth sheet – never plastic. You can also put Christmas lights on the plant, but use the type that get warm (not LED). Unfortunately you can buy plants sooner than last frost in the nurseries, but I wouldn't put them in the ground until after the last freeze. If you can resist, delay purchasing them until after last frost. Let the nurseries care for the plants in the meantime and face the loss from freeze and wind.