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Everyone is holding their breath to see what type of winter weather we are going to have this year. It started out mild and dry in November, but by mid-December we got our first taste of cold weather, so what will January bring and what will it mean for our gardens? If we do get hard freezes or winter precipitation, knowing what to do and what not to do can determine how well your plants survive.

Pay attention to moisture levels around your plants, especially any in containers or newly planted trees and shrubs as well as winter annuals and vegetables. If plants are too dry heading into a hard freeze there is no buffer to protect them from winter damage, and they can suffer more damage.

In the winter months plants go dormant, similar to bears hibernating for the winter. Evergreen plants retain most of their leaves, but they basically shut down their systems for the winter. You will see no new growth, but as long as there is moisture in the plant it will buffer the leaves from freezing temperatures. When frozen, you may see some evergreens that look wilted or deformed. This is especially noticeable on larger leaved plants like aucuba (gold dust plant) and winter annuals like pansies. As soon as they thaw out, the leaves return to their normal shapes. When frozen, leaves are brittle, so you should try to avoid much contact with frozen plants, or leaves or branches can snap off causing permanent damage. Deciduous plants are those that lose their leaves in the fall or early winter. Bare branches can shed precipitation more easily than those with leaves or needles. Evergreen plants can be more susceptible to ice and snow damage, because of the added weight of the winter precipitation on the foliage. You have all seen pine trees bending low with a heavy coat of snow or ice. If you do have plants that are bending or leaning, many will correct that on their own in a few weeks, but if they were bent for a long period of time, you can help by staking once they have thawed out.

If you have landscape plants that you can easily reach, lightening the load of snow with a broom or rake can help, but don't touch the plants if they are covered in ice. When shifting snow, use a gentle motion from the underside of the plant. If it is snowing, chances are temperatures are below freezing, so you want to avoid damaging the plants while trying to reduce snow weight. If you do experience winter damage, don't be too quick to prune. You do need to remove any broken limbs or branches as soon as you notice them, but burned or damaged foliage can actually serve as added winter protection for the plant. Wait until spring to see where new growth begins before doing corrective pruning.

Hardy trees and shrubs will not need any kind of covering for the winter months, but flowering shrubs and trees will be at their most vulnerable state when the flower buds begin to open and show color in late winter to early spring.

If you planted a late fall or winter garden, the vegetables are doing nicely. Continue to water when dry and fertilize periodically too. Most cool season vegetables thrive in cool weather, but may need a bit of extra covering when temperatures fall below 26-28 degrees. Frost damage is always worse on a cold still night. Overcast or windy nights tend to help prevent heavy frost accumulations. Low growing vegetable plants can easily be protected with a variety of methods.

Many gardeners have constructed a home version of a high tunnel. Using a panel of wire it can be constructed to fit over a raised bed or in-ground garden plot. The panel can be covered with plastic or cloth to be used on really cold nights. An inverted cardboard box, empty 5 gallon bucket, plant container or a heavy layer of leaves can also work. The plants will not suffer if they are covered for a few days. Remove the covering once the weather warms up.

If you are growing cold-tolerant plants like turnip or mustard greens, kale and cabbage, if they do get zapped by cold, they often re-sprout once the weather clears up.

Our winters have been getting warmer overall, but we never know what to expect. The key is being prepared for whatever comes our way.