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The Effect of Winter on Plants

January – the middle of winter and your plants are outside in the cold. Find out how cold temperatures and winds may be affecting your plants.

If you've selected plants that are cold hardy in our area then there is little concern over losing them to cold weather. Cold-hardy plants condition themselves for cold temperatures as they experience several successive freezes throughout late fall and early winter. A sudden, bitter cold in fall, before plants have become conditioned, can cause more damage than colder temperatures of mid – late winter.

Moisture loss to drying winds and dry soils is a concern through winter. Evergreens are especially susceptible because, unlike deciduous trees and shrubs, they retain their foliage during winter which results in greater moisture loss. A deep watering once or twice a month is essential throughout winter. Water in the afternoon when temperatures are above 40 degrees F.

A well-mulched plant is a happy plant. This extra layer of insulation helps to moderate soil temperatures and reduce moisture loss. Add mulch after several hard freezes so that the plant has had time to become conditioned to the cold.

Wind will exacerbate winter desiccation. You can treat evergreens in the fall with an anti-transpirant such as Cloud Cover which will reduce the rate of water loss from the foliage.

Late winter and early spring are a difficult time for plants as they begin to emerge from their winter dormancy. If a late freeze occurs when a plant has broken dormancy (buds are beginning to swell and young leaves are showing) then damage can be sustained. Spring flowering trees and shrubs are particularly vulnerable. Later flowering varieties will fare better with the late freezes common to our area. You'll notice that our native plants are slow to break dormancy – they've learned to be patient.

You may not be able to control the weather but you can increase the chance of a plant's winter survival by selecting cold hardy plants, mulching, and watering deeply once or twice a month through winter. Choosing late flowering varieties will reduce the chance of losing flower buds to a late freeze.

