

Being a true desert dweller

Being a true desert dweller involves dealing with more than just the summer. We also experience a distinct cool season, with its occasional cold periods. These times can be even more stressful than the hot ones! For heat-loving plants, they can be **much** worse. A surprising number of plants die from cold in our area. Not as many as from badly drained soil, but too many, nonetheless.

When gardening in the desert, the question of what does it really mean for a plant to be adapted is a major one. A plant that can survive in this region is growing in soil that is nutrient poor, calcium rich, and often poorly drained. It would die in a climate with long, cold winters.

Despite that, we can grow many beautiful desert plants that thrive throughout the summer – yuccas, agaves and aloes. Some of the agaves and many of the aloes can suffer mightily, however, when temperatures drop during December and January.

The beautiful bougainvillea can bloom merrily from late spring through fall, but can be severely damaged during the winter, even if it does not experience freezing temperatures. So too, would the saguaro cactus. That is a major reason that we recommend against planting them.



Bougainvillea



Saguaro Cactus

These are marginal for our climate, and as summer comes to a close, we should be looking at some ways to shelter them from the cold.

Fortunately there are practices that might not be fool-proof, but can provide at least a measure of seasonal protection.

First, do not fertilize a plant just as winter begins to arrive. Even if a shrub or tree does not shed its leaves, it will not be growing much during the chilly period. Applying a fertilizer, particularly one high in nitrogen, promotes growth, which is exactly what you do not want when it should be slowing down.

If possible, apply mulch to the soil. Mulch keeps soil cooler during the summer, but also helps keep it warmer in cold times. Think of it as a layer of insulation for plants. Desert plants – cacti and yuccas – should have two inches of rock mulch, which mimics desert pavement. Other, non desert, plants such as roses, fruit trees, and many flowering vines, should receive a layer of organic mulch, at least three inches deep. This can be chipped bark or waste wood, even straw or hay. These organic mulches slowly decompose and provide a very small amount of nutrition to the soil. When using one around woody trees and shrubs, keep it a couple of inches from the bark. Otherwise, it would be akin to holding a wet sponge against the trunk: an invitation to disease-causing organisms.

Southern Nevada winters generally permit a year round vegetable garden. There may be leafy greens and root crops that need protection in addition to mulch. “Row covers” are light, spun bond materials that can cover plants during the coldest hours, then removed during the day, as long as temperatures are above about 40°. They are readily available from nursery suppliers. Dr. Angela O'Callaghan is the Social Horticulture Specialist for Clark County Cooperative Extension. Contact ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu or 702-257-5581.