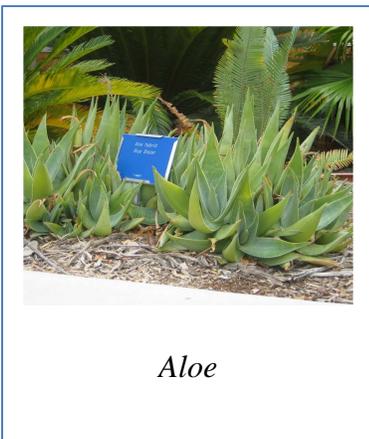


Freezing temps

When many people hear the term “desert”, their mental image is one of an intensely hot and dry area. The dramatically cold temperatures that recently seized Southern Nevada demonstrated otherwise. When an area is called a desert, you can only be certain that the environment is dry, but it is not necessarily hot. Antarctica, for instance, is one of the driest climates on earth, and indeed it is technically the largest desert on the planet. Southern Nevada might have felt like an ice box, but it could not compare with that!

For some landscape plants, the temperatures might as well have been arctic. Because freezing temperatures are relatively uncommon here in the Las Vegas valley and its environs, it can be tempting to risk using plants that are not well suited for the weather extremes here. The most tender plants, both edible and ornamental, can develop something called “chilling injury” at temperatures lower than 40°F. These are ill-suited to this area, and would be better in regions further south, like the Sonora Desert of southern Arizona. They can be found in a number of landscapes, but would be better off planted elsewhere.

Many specimens are not quite that fragile, but are not exactly “hardy” either. While they may not suffer chilling injury, these plants will not tolerate freezing temperatures. They are sure to experience harm on those rare occasions when it drops much below 32°F. It is a pity that quite a few of them have been installed in local landscapes. Even some well-adapted plants can become damaged in the desert cold; marginal ones can be killed.



For instance, I have had a lovely grouping of large aloe vera (*Aloe barbadensis*) growing in my yard, and they have been terrifically successful for about three years when we had mild temperatures. They are not native, nor terribly well adapted, unfortunately. After a week of evenings and nights in the deep freeze, they became flaccid and grey. I still have hope. Because they were well established before the cold, the root system has probably survived, which will allow them to revive.

There are probably thousands of local gardeners facing a similar situation – healthy plants that survived previous winters but now look like death.

At the Cooperative Extension office, we want to hear about these plants. Specifically, we want to know:

- What kind of plant was it?
- How long was it in that location?
- Was it healthy before the freeze?
- Was it near a wall (protected) or exposed?
- What direction did it face?
- When was it last watered?
- When was it last fertilized?

If enough people call in with this information about their damaged or dead plants, it will be possible to develop guidance so people will face less of this heartache in the future.

Although a plant may look as if it is dead, if it has a robust root system there is a decent chance that it has survived and will return. If you can avoid removing it until well into the spring, you might have a happy surprise.

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