

## Late frost

The weather here in the Mojave Desert is lovely this early February! The sun is shining brightly, the air is warm, and trees throughout the valley are getting ready to burst into bloom. Indeed, some fruit trees have begun to show hints of flowers. Our recent rainfall, while not significant enough to affect our drought, moistened the soil enough to encourage seeds to germinate. These seeds include ones we planted as well as the weed seeds that insist on appearing, uninvited.



*Nectarine Flower*

While this is exciting, we must remember that the weather can be fickle. In southern Nevada, it can be cruelly so. Temperatures can rise into the 70's in February, but by no means does that indicate they will remain so high. The last frost date in our desert environment can be March or even April. Should tender blossoms become frosted, they are highly unlikely to be able to produce fruit. Fortunately, many flowers escape this sad fate because of the microclimates in which they are growing. A microclimate can be far more comfortable for plants to grow.

Gardeners create microclimates when they dedicate an area for their fruits, flowers and vegetables. Installing irrigation, for instance, means that the humidity can be increased significantly. The area behind a wall will miss some of the worst wind damage, and depending on where the wall is located, might even be several degrees warmer than the rest of the yard. Mulch keeps soil insulated against the vagaries of hot and cold, as well as conserving water and reducing the potential for weed infestation.



*Cabbage Flower*

Many of our leafy vegetables die after they flower. Lettuce is one that dies after creating blooms, but not before becoming eye-wateringly bitter. Spinach does not become particularly bad tasting, but will die after flowering. That is one definition of an annual plant.

A few plants will tolerate a little frost – members of the cabbage family, for instance, are quite hardy. Many people find that the taste of these cabbages, broccoli, turnips, cauliflower and kale improves their flavor. This often means a spicier taste. If these plants are well established and the temperature drops, however, the environment induces them to flower. These flowers always have four petals, and come in shades of yellow, white or pink. They are edible, and while not ugly, are not so attractive that one would strive to get them. Once these plants (and virtually

all members of the mustards) produce their flowers, the parent plant will die.

Protecting plants from chill is not terribly difficult. If temperatures are going to drop into the low 30's or even into the upper 20's, create a shelter of row cover. This fabric is very fine and lightweight. Under such a row cover, it can be up to three degrees warmer than an unprotected site. What appears at first to be a minimal warming can make a world of difference to a sensitive plant.

The desert is nothing if not challenging, especially for gardeners. We are, however, creative when it comes to saving our plants.

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