

The Mojave Desert winter

Winter in the Mojave Desert is **serious**. It can get really cold at night, too cold for some of the landscape plants we enjoy.

Several years can go by without killing frosts, but every few years a **big** chill kills those plants not designed to tolerate the cold. These are often beautiful flowering plants, like lantana and bougainvillea, which may freeze down to the ground, but should come back if well established. The **best** way to deal with those killing winter frosts here in Southern Nevada is to plan ahead, and not plant things that are likely to die during frosty times.

Some popular landscape plants are poorly equipped to deal with a harsh southern Nevada winter. Low temperatures and strong winds can kill Eucalyptus and California pepper trees, as well as pretty and graceful Chir pines. As for citrus, except perhaps for Meyer's lemon, citrus are not designed to survive most winters here.



Prickly Pear Cacti



Cholla Cacti



Barrell Cacti

The cacti that do well in southern Nevada are natives, like barrel, certain prickly pears and cholla. There are no saguaro cacti growing wild in the Mojave; those are adapted to the Sonora Desert, where it seldom freezes.

Most houseplants are unable to survive winter outside because they evolved in places that never experience killing frosts.

Certain palms come through the winter unscathed, but others, like the queen palm, are not equipped to face seriously cold temperatures.

The fir most important way to get your plants through Southern Nevada's winters is: select well-adapted plants. But many of us give in to the temptation to grow at least a few things that are really frost tender. You can shelter them against some chilling damage by wrapping their growing tips, with a layer of landscape fabric, or a blanket. Plastic mulch **is not** very efficient insulation, and it blocks the air supply, so diseases can get established.

What else can protect tender plants when it gets cold? If temperatures are **threatening** to drop significantly, cut back on watering. Remember - water swells when it freezes, even inside a plant. You can limit damage by letting plants get a little drier when it is really cold. You still have to water some –we do live in the desert.

Fertilize less in the cold. Most plants grow slowly in short days and cool temperatures, and use fertilizer less efficiently. It gets wasted and may pollute ground water. Fertilizers promote growth, and newest growth is most vulnerable to frost damage. Do not encourage new growth that gets damaged by cold.

In the late winter and early spring, freezes can damage the tender buds on fruiting trees and flowering shrubs. Some people use mini Christmas tree lights around plants for warmth, but that is not guaranteed to work.

Outdoor water supplies and features are also vulnerable to freezing, so insulate around outdoor water sources for fountains and irrigation.

Fortunately, our cold weather is relatively short lived. This is a good time for pruning fruit trees and preparing for the spring, which is not far behind.

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