



As gardeners watch the gentle emergence of spring flowering bulbs and the unfurling new leaves of perennials, shrubs and trees with one eye, they are watching the weather with the other. To some, protecting the garden plants from the usual spring extremes is a loving chore and a rite of spring. And then there are gardeners like myself – a Darwin believer through and through – you know, the strong shall survive, the weak will rise no more. Reality is somewhere in between those two poles. So what to do - uncover, use more cover, or just leave them alone? My short answer is usually – just leave them alone, even when I take off my Darwin gardening hat. For those wanting a longer answer, keep reading.

When choosing landscape plants, looking for materials that are cold hardy is not just another exercise to make the novice gardener earn “the dirty garden gloves of pride”. Expect the unexpected from early spring weather. Periodic mid-season warm stretches, sudden drops in temperature, crispy frost or ice coverings in May, raging snowstorms in June – all are historic, some very recent. Plants that are native to this area, or that are climatically suitable, will adapt to the varied environmental conditions that descend upon this part of the country every year. The way the plants survive a variety of conditions depends on many factors. Two that top my list are whether they are bred or selected from hardy stock for the zone they are planted in and the overall health going into this season, and a number of seasons before, as well. A hardy and healthy plant will generally be able to bounce back from most weather setbacks thrown at it.

Ah, those glorious days of 50 degrees F in January. Balm for the soul but wicked for the plants. Those early warm stretches often induce a plant to leaf out early. Life is good and we're all happy to see some green. But when the frost and/or ice hits, the results are often brown/black coloring and crispy tissue. Most of the time plants will send out a new flush of leaves that may not be as big, but will do their work just fine. And when healthy, there will not be any noticeably prolonged damage. If the blooms are hit, expect to lose some if not all of the flowers. Relax, it's only one season. There will be many more to enjoy, maybe even a second minor flush of bloom in late spring. If the fruit blossoms are forming when frost or ice occur, production will probably be lower. Again, relax. Worrying will not produce more fruit this season. Use this as a reason to focus on other aspects of the plant throughout the year, like improving structure, decreasing turf around the base, or maybe just take some time to look at the nice leaves. There are some measures that can be taken to protect crops and flowers, if you are willing to invest the time and money. Frost irrigation systems, tarp covers and lights, heaters and fans, sometimes even incantations have been known to work – okay, just kidding on that last one. These

protection systems can be used successfully when set up and handled appropriately and responsibly. Do be aware that plant material should not be pruned immediately after frost or ice unless it is to remove broken and/or dangerous branches. You can certainly magnify damage by handling ice encrusted plant material.

Surprisingly, the fluctuations in temperatures can actually create situations of slower spring growth or even suspension. Weather changes keep the plants guessing (so to speak) as to what to do - the plant system reacts to the weather changes a bit more slowly at this time of the year. But it is not just the temperature lows and highs that impact plant reactions. Humidity and cloud cover play important roles in how the plants are affected by spring cold snaps. When skies are clear and humidity is low the effects of cold can be somewhat magnified, especially after sunset. Cloud cover helps moderate cold temperatures by deflecting and radiating heat back toward the earth – which is why those clear skies, while gorgeous to view, may assist in doing substantial damage to plant material. When air humidity is higher, that means increased air density. This slows the air temperature changes, moderating the effects of nighttime cold snaps.

Snow – please. In this part of the country, expect it until June and be pleasantly surprised if we don't get any. The wonderful thing about snow is it does have a great insulating effect. As long as it doesn't get packed onto the plant material they should be fine when left alone to enjoy a nice slow drink as the snow melts. More often than not, humans do the most damage in trying to be helpful. Be careful around the plants after it snows. If compelled to brush snow accumulations off of any plant material – do it carefully and with potential plant loss in mind. If you touch it, you are impacting the plant's ability to react and adjust to changes naturally.

Concern about plant health is good – it improves our level of involvement. But to worry about the cold is not a good use of time and not very effective at much of anything. And really, overall, many of our plants will be okay with anything Mommy Nature throws around. Those tulips, daffodils, crocus, and hyacinth that are emerging really love the cold. The peonies poking their eyes up are only checking to see if spring is really here – they will not be shaken by a bit of cold weather, they actually like it. Hardy and healthy plants with plenty of stored sugar concentrates will survive weather fluctuations like the northern champs they are. So, put down the rake, it's too early for spring cleanup. And don't even think about adding more mulch right now, it's too early. Just relax, sit down, have a cup of tea or coffee, enjoy the sunshine, and watch your garden emerge for the new growing season. And if you can't relax, go sharpen your tools.