

Winter Freeze and Drought

January 30, 2001

All things considered.....

This has not been a good winter for our lawns and plantings. We have not had measurable rain in almost four months! This last month we had three nights of freezes!!

We are on phase II water restrictions with some people calling for phase III. I can't remember a winter where the cold lasted for days and days like it did this year and it's not over yet. About 4 or 5 years ago, we had a freeze as late as February 9, and our last frost date isn't until March 15. I remember seeing frost on my roof as late as St. Patrick's Day.

What does this mean for us?

There is a lot of freeze damage to our plants now. Areas further east suffered extensive damage whereas areas like Sanibel suffered little or no damage. We HIGHLY recommend plants not be trimmed back until reasonable risk of more cold is past, somewhere around late February or early March. If plants are trimmed too early, we could expose them to further damage and cause more injury, maybe even to the point where their survival could be in jeopardy. Please keep in mind that cold damage may not manifest itself for months down the road. Ixora and Hibiscus are good examples of where the injury won't show for several months. We can then recognize it as chlorotic leaves and die back. The stems may show where the cambium and phloem have died and the surrounding tissue has tried to grow around the injury. Palms are also of special concern. If there is any damage in the central bud, rot can set in and kill the palm. It could take months for the damage to become evident. We would be happy to review any plants you may have questions or concerns about. Spring feeding will help strengthen or plants and lawns and we will begin our feeding the last week of January and will continue through the middle of February.

To add insult to injury, we are faced with phase II water restrictions. This should not be a problem now because cooler temperatures require less water. Two times a week watering is more than enough as long as the daytime temperatures stay below the lower 80s. Once the temps start hitting the upper 80s or the lower 90s, sometime in April, we are going to start having problems. First thing to show is where the sprinklers are not hitting as efficiently as they should and brown dry spots start appearing in the lawn. Some of this is normal because most irrigation systems were not designed to operate in this type of drought situation. The solution may be as simple as replacing a head, running more time on that zone or cutting back a bush. In more extreme situations, we may have to move heads or even allow an area to die and replace it when we start receiving rain or the water restrictions are lifted.

We have paid pretty close attention to our customer's irrigation systems this winter and last fall, so I think we are in pretty good shape. All of our accounts should have been checked and switched to the correct days. If you don't believe this to be the case, please let your foreman know or call the office and we can follow up from here.

Last year we started noticing problems with the level of salt in our well water. The Horticultural Extension Service in Lee County says that water with over 2100ppm of salt is unsuitable for irrigation. Many of our wells we tested came back with as much as 3900ppm! Whether our wells are getting worse, or we're not having the rains to dilute the salt, we have had damage to some of our plantings. If we suspect salt injury we can take a sample to the Extension service and have it tested free.

If phase III restrictions are imposed, we could be in trouble. The South Water Management District understands the tremendous economic impact phase III restrictions will cause and they will resist implementing them except as a last resort. Let's hope it doesn't become necessary. If they do, we need to be ready. Our irrigation systems should be adjusted to provide as much water as allowed. In some cases we can run the system longer to put out more water and still stay within the legal guidelines.

Over the years, we have seen various products advertised claiming to reduce the amount of water your landscape needs to survive. They mostly contain different organics which can hold water in the soil and control its release as opposed to having the water run through our porous soils. We will look into the effectiveness of these products and update you as to how well they work and what expense may be involved.

Another excellent way to conserve water is to keep your beds mulched. Not only does this improve the appearance of your landscaping, it can make a huge difference in the amount of water your plantings require. We are going to be to the point where every little bit will help.

We have been through this before and we will go through it again. As more and more people move into the area, this type of thing will probably become more common. If we work together and work towards the same goal, we can make it through this in excellent shape and be prepared for the summer rains when we'll be dealing with too much water.

As always, should you wish to discuss any of the above issues or any other concerns about your yard and plantings, please don't hesitate to ask.

Sincerely,

Terry McLaughlin