

WINTER DAMAGE

Is My Frozen Shrub Dead?

By Cass Turnbull

After an extraordinarily cold winter in Western Washington, many garden owners will want to know what to do about the damage to many of our not-completely-hardy shrubs. With many of our broadleaf evergreens, it's common for their leaves to turn brown or black and eventually fall off. The plants themselves are probably still alive. To check, use a hand-pruner blade to peel back a little bit of the "skin" to see if the cambium layer just beneath is alive (green) and not dead (brown). If alive, it'll probably flush out with a new set of leaves. So don't panic if your shrub looks dead. Wait and see. How long? By June you will have an answer. By then, those that can put on a new set of leaves will have done so. If you can't stand the sight of the stricken brown shrub until June, try running your hands along the branches to knock the brown leaves off. Then, the plant might seem to be deciduous, not dead.

By the end of August, the final report will be in. Freezing weather sometimes does internal damage that doesn't show up until after the stress of the summer "drought". A shrub may look okay through June and July, but then, while it is pumping H₂O like crazy trying to keep up with the heat demand in August, some portions can collapse, and you will see die-back. (The non-scientific explanation is my own and may be a little, well, anthropomorphic.)

Many evergreen shrubs, such as escallonia, that suffer freeze damage, will die from the tip back. These shrubs respond well to radical size reduction which in this case means big ugly cuts to the point of green wood. The plants will "break bud" just below your cuts and many new green-leafed shoots will rather quickly grow out to hide the cuts and provide you with a "new" plant by the end of the growing season.

In the case of choisya, branches will split, break or splay flat to the ground due to snow loading. Get your loppers out and whack everything back to 4" to 6" off the ground. Yes, it's really Okay. I promise. I have done this thing many times. As soon as the growing season begins, the majority of cut plants will spring into action. As the renovated shrubs grow up, it is advisable to pinch them back every so often, to encourage branching and thicken them up. "Pinching" means a very light heading, just nipping the end bud of each branch with your fingernails or hand-pruners.

Got Snow? Should You Go Out and Bang the Bushes?

By Cass Turnbull

I too am trapped inside the house by the rare, lengthy snow in Seattle. I did manage to crunch around outdoors with a fan rake (a broom also works well) jiggling the branches of snow-laden, non-deciduous shrubs (Osmanthus, bamboo, pieris, etc) to knock off the snow that was bending them over. That will stop those branches from breaking under the snow load.

Such a program is not without potential risks. If it turns into a bright, sunny, frozen day tomorrow said plants may be in danger of 'drought' damage. Without the protective layer of snow, the leaves will be exposed to the heat of the sun. They begin to transpire but, since the ground is frozen, no water uptake and replenishment can occur. I will know later if they were damaged if the leaves look scorched.

So what can you do to prevent that? If you dearly love your shrub, and especially if it is delicate, you could temporarily cover it with a cotton bed sheet to shield it from the sun. Whatever you do, don't substitute plastic, clear or black, since it will heat up even worse than leaving the shrub in the direct sun.

Snow damage on 'pyramidalis' hedges. (Thuja occidentalis Douglasii Pyramidalis)

By Cass Turnbull

After the big snow this winter people are wondering what to do about pyramidalis hedges that have had many of their limbs pulled out by the weight of the snow, looking like a giant blue Ox 'cow-licked' them. First, you should know this always happens. It's not your fault, although if you shear your hedge, it is somewhat more likely to fall apart since it encourages a lot of weight on the branch ends. Shearing a pyramidalis hedge is a silly thing to do in any case. It's redundant. The whole reason they were invented was so that you could have a skinny, tidy, dressed-to-the-ground evergreen screen that needs no maintenance whatsoever.

But now what? A little thinning and tying-in is about all you can do. Avoid shortening (heading or reducing) the flopped branch if you can. Sometimes you have to, but as mentioned above, the resulting heavy growth at the branch end can cause future problems. Whenever possible lighten the weight on the end using thinning cuts. Perhaps it will be enough that the branch pops back up. But if this isn't enough you can tie it back in place. This is a tricky business and generally not recommended in most pruning situations. Why? If those ties are forgotten, and they usually are, the plant will girdle (strangle) itself as the branch thickens against the non-expanding tie material. But there is not much else you can do in this particular situation. I like to use pantyhose for tying, because it is soft, brownish and flexible and will probably rot away before the plant is girdled. By then I can always hope that the branch has become stronger or otherwise will be held in place by new growth. The only other thing you can do is deadwood. If large unsightly holes have developed, go in with a really good pair of hand pruners and an obsessive-compulsive frame of mind and prune and brush out every tiny brown twig and every nest of accumulated dead needles (awls actually). This will make the bare spot look less horrible until new growth covers it over.

Phormiums and Hebes

By Ciscoe Morris

I think the Phormiums will come back. After some really cold winters they haven't come back, but from the checking I've done, I'm pretty sure they survived, at least in the Seattle area. The frozen leaves have had it, so the trick is to cut them all the way (or as close as possible) to the ground. This is no easy feat as the dang leaves (used to make clothes by the indigenous people in New Zealand) are really hard to cut. I use a combination of things including hand pruners, big scissors and sheep shears. It's definitely a Zen experience, and seems to take forever. New leaves will take the place of the old dead ones, so you want to get the old ugly ones down as far as possible. The problem is that it takes practically a whole summer for the new leaves to grow back to about a foot tall. Some years I've dug plants and relocated them to sunny, out-of-the-way areas to give them time to grow, then moved them back into a key spot the following spring. Most folks just toss them. After you cut them back, it's a good time to divide them by the way. I do that with a bow or a hack saw. The good news is that by the end of summer, you've got a really lovely, but much smaller Phormium.

With Hebe, I scrape the wood at the base to see if they're even alive. The cold will have put the 'el kabotski' on many varieties. Once I've determined that the Hebe is alive, I wait to cut in spring until leaves emerge on the lower stems and then cut to just above where growth is occurring. Again, it takes at least a season to grow into anything worth looking at, but if the following winter doesn't hammer it again, within a couple of seasons you'll have a thick, lush Hebe to grace your garden.

Stay warm, everyone!