

# Randy's 9 Rules for Horticultural Freeze Recovery - Updated

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By **Randy Lemmon** Feb 25, 2021 [NewsRadio 740 KTRH](#)

First off, if you weren't aware, the winter storm of Valentine's Week was named Uri! And now, we're facing a horticultural Armageddon.

There's a lot of misinformation being shared on the internet, but what's below are rock-solid rules that will help you decide what to work on first, when to have patience, and what stays and what goes.

There's no doubt that we will be cutting back and cleaning out more than ever before. But, in recent days in my consulting business and through helping close friends and family, I've been impressed by many of the things that made it through, even when they weren't supposed to.

If you haven't uncovered or unwrapped anything, do it NOW! We've got to get everything as much sun and air as possible immediately. Plus, by getting a peek at trunks and things, we'll know pretty quickly which plants survived or which will require any cutback or removal.

So, here are my rules for freeze recovery, re-edited one more time and reprioritized:

1.If it's mushy, gushy, ooey or gooey, get rid of it! Cut it out, remove it - do whatever it takes to get the nasty stuff out of there. If you cut all the spongy parts away from tropicals like bananas, lilies, bulbs, iris of all kinds, or even things like split-leaf philodendrons, you'll likely be left with just a tiny bit of green material near the ground. But it's imperative you cut away anything that's mushy and wet. You really need to get the squishy stuff out because it could harbor fungal diseases that will be pulled into the remaining plant. Just remember you will need to protect them from future freezes that can kill root system if you've cut all the way to the nubs. It's also recommended that you spray a copper-based fungicide right after you've cut back to the ground to prevent fungal diseases that love to creep in with circumstances of this type.

2.If you feel confident that we'll get no more hard freezes through mid-March, you can jump right into most lawn care protocols. First, we give the lawn a "haircut" to get all the burnt tips out of there. Bag these grass clippings, please - don't let them fall to the soil and create a layer of thatch. If you can't bag 'em, rake out as much dead grass as possible. Then we can do everything called for in my lawn fertilization schedule, and I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU DID PRIOR TO THE FREEZE. Let's pick up the schedule immediately and move forward. You also need to remove all the dead leaves that have fallen from trees, especially live oaks. Some people will call removing the burnt grass tips "scalping" the lawn. Years ago, a scalping would mean lowering

the mower deck by 2-4 notches. These days, though, we know it's better to just a lower the deck a notch or two and vacuum up as much debris as possible, so the live roots are open to air, sunshine, water and fertilizer. However, you must honestly believe no more freezes are coming. Otherwise, just rake out as much debris as possible and skip the mowing. Another hard freeze could actually kill a scalped St. Augustine lawn.

3.If you think your St. Augustine lawn has a lot of thatch built up, don't mechanically de-thatch - give it the haircut, then add the trace minerals and trace elements called for in the fertilization schedule. This is almost imperative, even if you did it six months ago, because the extreme freeze, ice and snow annihilated most of that good stuff. So, even if you don't fertilizer for a while, at least get the trace minerals and elements down. If you can't find them, there are other amendments containing humus or humates and molasses. Three companies well-known in Southeast Texas for their trace minerals and elements packages are Nature's Way, Soil Mender and Azomite. Any of them will help break down thatch. Double-screened composts can be great amendments, too, if nothing else is available.

4.Palm Tree Inspection: My most often-asked question over the past week in email and on Facebook has been, "How can I tell if my palm is still alive?" There is no pat answer. But if a smooth-trunked palm shows no cracks or doesn't seem mushy to the touch, there's a good chance it survived - but it's probably going to be a wait-and-see situation. If you can get up high enough to look down into the crown where new fronds will come out, and you see green, you're golden. A drone camera can help with this. But if it looks mushy, gray, brown or gooey, it's a goner. As of Feb. 23, my consultations have shown that those whose trunks were diligently wrapped seem to have survived. Meanwhile, another immediate step you can take with palms such as queen palms is to cut off any frond that is droopy or has completely flopped downward. They're not worth saving. If a Mexican fan palm or a sylvestris has fronds in their normal upright positions, wait on pruning them even if they're yellow or brown. We have plenty of time to take those down if they don't show any life emerging from the crown.

5.If a palm is small enough or short enough to get to the fronds (a dwarf pygmy date palm is an example), pull on those in the interior to see if they stay attached. If they easily slide out, the plant is dead. If they hold tight, the plant may still be alive, but it may be two months before we know for sure. Sago palms fronds won't pull out even if dead - their future is determined by whether its crown or core is still alive. If you see tan, fuzzy growth with spines poking out in a twist, your sago is alive.

6.If it's crispy and brown, cut it back to green wood. Hibiscus, lantana, hamelia and other perennials are great examples. Or just leave crispy and brown freeze-damaged plants alone until you feel certain no more freezing weather is ahead. If you do cut back damaged plants to green wood, be sure to super-protect them if another freeze is forecast. There are two reasons: A. The fresh cut will act like a straw, pulling freezing temperatures directly into the plant. That can totally kill a perennial that otherwise could handle such weather. B. If you cut back, and temperate weather prompts new growth, the new parts will be highly susceptible to damage from any future freeze.

7.If you cut a brown-and-crispy plant to the ground and see no sign of green, but the root system seems to be firmly locked in, consider leaving it alone to see if it comes back from the roots. Be sure to protect what's left during any future freeze. If, however, the root system moves around easily – like a car's stick shift – it's dead. You can remove the whole thing. Plants that I've seen survive freezes like 2011 and 2018, but have been killed to the roots this year, are Japanese blueberry, gardenias and Indian hawthorns. However, if they were covered, there's a good chance there's a tiny bit of green still left.

8.I may have upset some people by not prioritizing citrus, but if you took time to protect 'em well, they are likely still alive. We can wait another week or two to get busy with them. However, if they are your priority, and you were able to salvage the trunks and save the graft of tropical fruits like citrus, avocado and papaya, prune them back as early as this Saturday, even if they were pruned in early February. When Houston experienced the Polar Vortex of January 2014, and the Ninja Freeze in March, many citrus trees were in bloom and baby fruit was forming. Yet, we were still able to save many by re-pruning and aggressively feeding from that point on. So, if the trunk and graft were saved, you can bring citrus and avocado back from the brink. Also, if you are seeing blackening at the tips of branches, go back to rule #1. And when you prune citrus over the next couple of weeks, treat all the pruned branches and any slight cracks with a copper fungicide.

9.CRACKS-CRACKS-CRACKS! Look for cracks and splits in trunks. This applies to almost any plant in our landscapes. Unfortunately, the more cracks you find, the more likely it's dead. Even standard shrubs like azaleas, gardenias, bottlebrush, plumbagos and durantas. There are all kinds of splits and cracks out there on things like fruit trees, citrus trees and almost any plant that has a trunk. Splits and cracks are the worst thing to see. One itty-bitty crack is nothing to panic about, but big splits and multiple cracks are a sure sign that moisture inside the bark froze, expanded, and popped through. That also means that freezing temperatures starting creeping into the plant. I'm sure there will be a plant or two with a single crack that might be salvageable, but in general, if you have a plant with big, multiple cracks and dark-looking fissures, you have a plant that's not going to recover. Single cracks may be worth trying to save with a spray of copper fungicide.

Please share this information with friends and neighbors and encourage them to tune in GardenLine each weekend to learn more about recovering from extreme weather and succeeding with gardening along the Gulf Coast.