



## Protect Your Garden from Erratic Winter Weather

After a very mild and dry fall, Chicago has finally experienced its first hard freeze of the winter. These days, however, you can expect our winter temperatures to fluctuate wildly and that puts the plants in your garden at risk for winter damage. But there are a few things that you can do now to protect your plants this winter:

**Cover up** - Once you've cut back the blackened stems and foliage of frost-affected perennials, apply a thick layer of organic mulch throughout your garden beds, keeping it slightly away from the base of each plant. Mulch helps to keep the soil temperature even and the ground consistently frozen. Shredded hardwood mulch or chopped leaves from your trees are two great mulch options.

**Wrap trunks** - Frost cracks can occur on the bark of deciduous trees when temperatures fluctuate. These cracks are not serious as long as they are kept clean and open during the growing season. Sunscald typically occurs on the southwest side of young trees when the days are warm and the nights are cold, initially appearing as sunken and discolored bark. In the spring, the bark then cracks and falls off. To prevent both frost cracks and sunscald, wrap tree trunks with a flexible, protective barrier. Come spring, be sure to remove all wrapping to prevent diseases and insects from infecting the tree.

**Water evergreens** - We expect to see a fair amount of plant damage this winter because of the continuing drought. Evergreens in particular dry out from strong winds, the use of ice-melting chemicals, and from the lack of moisture in the air or soil. If temperatures rise above 40 degrees this winter and there is no snow coverage, water your evergreens deeply. Follow up with a layer of mulch to reduce the amount of water evaporation from the soil on warm winter days.

**Check for frost heaving** - Heaving occurs when the soil freezes and thaws repeatedly pushing shallow rooted plants out of the ground. This exposes their roots to the wind causing additional desiccation. During a thaw cycle, walk your garden and replant any plant that has heaved or if it is small enough, gently push it back into the ground with your fingers. To prevent frost heave, apply mulch as it helps to reduce the impact of temperature changes.

**Reuse your Christmas tree** - Once the ornaments have been put away, cut each branch off your Christmas tree and lay them on your garden beds. Focus on any areas that are prone to the freeze and thaw cycle, especially the south and west sides of your garden. In spring, once bulbs and perennials begin to poke through, remove the branches and cut them into small pieces and add them to your composter.

With a little bit of on-going care, starting with a healthy application of mulch, your garden can withstand our unpredictable midwest winters.

*Reprinted from MODE Landscape Design Vol 11: Protect Your Garden from Erratic Winter Weather, December 2012*



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