

As you probably already know, many of the vegetables that we grow here in the Houston area can withstand a temporary cold spell, emphasis on length and depth of the cold spell. Many of the vegetables that we grow can withstand cold temperatures in the mid to low 20's for a short amount of time. When the cold spell is of a long duration even these plants struggle to survive. But a hard freeze or temperatures that go into the teens can wipe out a garden and citrus trees especially if the temperature remains that low for several hours or longer.

With the weather forecasting of today, we are often forewarned of bad weather coming and we can try to protect our plants in advance. Typically that means watering and then covering or if our plants are in pots getting them inside until the weather improves. There are frost cloths that can be used to cover or protect the plants, even leaves can act as a barrier to a short term cold snap. This is what your gardeners did to successfully protect the onions we just planted including some of the newly planted lettuce and turnips. It is harder to protect those plants that are large such as the citrus trees. In the 2021 freeze we lost almost all of our citrus trees and had to replace the dead trees with new young plants. This year because the plants are small, 4 to 6 feet tall, we were able to cover these trees with frost cloths. That doesn't mean we saved the trees we will have to wait until the spring to see if the trees survived. That's because the freeze did kill off most of the leaves even though they were covered.

So this week's class spent time planting and cleaning up the dead plants. We also cut down the sugar cane which had frozen as well. If you tasted any of the sugar can you could tell it was already beginning to ferment. That means its sugars were being consumed by bacteria. Why doesn't this happen when the plants are growing do you think? Could it be because a healthy sugar cane plant can keep the bacteria from getting into the stem?

To get the gardens going again we are planting lettuce, radishes, and spinach. Because we protected some of the younger garden plants we are able to harvest turnips, and carrots. Why can we harvest carrots and not the beautiful beets we had been growing in the garden before the frost? Most all of the beets were frozen and decaying after the frost, so what was the difference between the beets and the carrots do you think? If you took the time, you may have also noticed that the onions look like nothing happened to them. That's because we used mulch to protect the young plants along with frost cloth to keep the warmth of the earth close to the young onion sets.

Overall this is a lesson in garden risks and rewards, planting doesn't automatically mean that you will have a crop does it? Planning helps make that a reality but only within reason. A gardener needs to know what his or her climate is going to be short term and long term and what precautions are necessary to have a good crop. If there were no grocery stores and we were eating only from our gardens we would be eating seasonal crops, things that can be grown and harvested in the climate (time and year) in which we live. So think back to the settlers that came to a new place and had to plant, grow, and harvest their food. What a challenge! They had little idea as to when and for how long the weather was going to allow them to grow food, they were new to the area. As history has shown, many new settlers died of starvation as crops failed and there was nothing to eat. We take our food sources for granted so understanding how to garden is a basic and valuable skill.

See you next time!