Protecting Your Plants from a Frost

Although the past winter has been cold and long, I can see the welcome signs of spring everywhere. Before you dash to your local nursery and start putting non-hardy plants in the ground, you may want to wait until the danger of frost has pasted. We might have one or two more cold nights that may be damaging to your plants. I always wait until after Good Friday before putting my tender plants in the ground.

For those of you who have already planted your tomatoes, they can be protected. Tomatoes, which are a tender non-hardy plant, will not tolerate freezing temperatures and can actually suffer chilling injury anywhere below 55 degrees. Protecting plants in the home garden from frost damage can be accomplished by trapping the heat that is radiating from the ground with clear plastic or similar material like straw, bed linens, old tablecloths and light blankets.

Pillowcases are great for slipping over taller upright plants. Cloths made out of various materials work well for smaller plants that cannot be brought inside. A blown glass bell jar, called a "cloche", can be used to protect plants. This jar acts like a mini-greenhouse around plants in less than desirable conditions. If you don't have a cloche, milk jugs or buckets can provide similar frost protection.

Plants need to be covered before temperatures have dropped below freezing to get the full benefit of frost protection materials. Be sure to not crush the plants. Always secure the containers and edges of row and plant covers to keep them from blowing away in windy conditions. Whatever you use to protect the plant needs to be taken off every morning when the sun comes out and temperatures begin to rise. Plants can easily overheat under a layer of straw, plastic or fabric.

Be sure to pay attention to the weather conditions this month. In April of 2008 this area received a devastating frost that killed lots of tender plants in our landscape. Let's hope that this doesn't happen again! Until next time, happy gardening!

Christopher Cooper