

Around My (Or Your) Desert Garden Bob Torrest

THE AFTERMATH OF THE REALLY HARD FREEZE OF JANUARY 13 AND 14

February 28 - By now, the extent of most of the freeze damage is apparent. Of course, in many cases it was immediately obvious... frozen aloe flower stalks, mush at aloe growing tips, etc. In other cases, it took a little while before the pilosocereus columns bent over, or less than healthy cacti finally gave up. We have been growing all kinds of cacti and other succulents a mile north of Camelback Road on 64th Street for over 23 years and this freeze was, by far, the most severe and damaging with temperatures down to about 20F everywhere. In fact, tough plants that had never shown any significant freeze damage before couldn't handle it. They included *Agave datylio*, *Aloe dichotoma* and *ramosissima*, *Portulacaria afra* and *Stenocereus griseus*. Trees like *Tipuana tipu* and yellow oleander are still brown. I'll be surprised if a small *Ceiba* survives. The extent of damage to a large *Chorisia speciosa* remains to be determined.

But before going into the gory details, there are colorful flowers on Cape honeysuckle, Salvias, Ruellia, Coulter's hibiscus and Hardenbergia vine, as well as a protected Blue hibiscus. Aloes flowering include *A. vaombe*, a large striking plant with bright red flowers (leaf tip damage was worst in the most shaded spot), *A. claviflora*, *A. aculeata*, *A. striata*, *A. karasbergensis*, *A. variegata*, *A. gariopensis*, *A. vacillans*, *A. globuligemma*, *A. branddraaiensis*, *A. sinkatana*, *A. spinosissima*, *A. zebrina* and several hybrids. And with all these aloe flowers the hummingbirds are happy. Cacti flowering include mammillarias such as *M. bombycina* (purple), *M. macdowellii* (pink-purple) and *M. lindsayi* (green clumps with yellow flowers), and *Neoporteria nidus* (with its striking bright long lived flowers). There are buds on some *Myrtillocactus geometrizans* and *Ferocactus glaucescens* is getting started with its small yellow flowers.

Aloe ramosissima is a striking plant with bright yellow flowers and a nicely marked trunk. They came through with only leaf tip damage for large mature plants in full sun. The damage was worse for plants in part shade and for two plants in lots of shade, the growing centers were all mush. So, plant at least some of your *A. ramosissima* in full sun. They can be grown from cuttings if you are patient. A miniature form (less than a foot high) that has been sold recently was ok on the side facing an adobe wall (at several feet) but seriously damaged on the side farthest away from the wall. *A. arborescens* was fine in sun near a block wall and the flower was little damaged. For plants in more shade there was more damage, but they will survive. A small *A. dichotoma* is gone but larger plants are ok with only more or less leaf tip damage. *A. divaricata* was half lost in shade and in worse shape in a more exposed location. *A. dorotheae* has a nice red-purple color adjacent to an adobe wall, but in more exposed locations there was lots of damage. The bushy *A. kedongensis* lost some exterior tip growth but most of it was fine. *A. secundiflora* flowered in an exposed location, but with substantial leaf damage. It came through with little damage adjacent to an adobe wall. Aloes lost in 1-gallon pots included *A. jacksonii*, *A. trichosantha*, *A. congolensis*, *A. bulbifera*, *A. pictifolia*, *A. elgonica*, *A. niebuhriana*, *A. mcloughlinii*, *A. pruinosa*, *A. thraskii* and *A. nobilis-variegata*. Of course, some of these might have survived with a cloth cover.

Cacti Damage - For columnar cacti, the cereus varieties are fine. *Stenocereus* are mostly ok with no problems for senitas, totem poles and Arizona organ-pipes, but there was tip damage or, in a few cases, more on some of the Mexican organ-pipes (*S. griseus*). Also, there was a bit of tip damage on some *S. gummosus* and *S. alamosensis* and on a more tropical variety. *Pachycereus* seem to be mostly ok except for some small emerging arms on a Cardon. *Pilosocereus* were all protected at the tips with polyfoam cups or paper sacks and are mostly ok. But thin columns like *P. gounellei*, *P. chrysostele* and *P. aureispinus* froze below the cups and some have collapsed. I won't bother with these varieties again. The attractive Mexican varieties like *P. palmeri* are fine. A few months ago I mentioned a tropical columnar, *Backebergia militaris* (Grenadier's cap), that was finally growing after 20 years in the ground. It was totally frozen, and we will have to live without it. Some of the *Myrtillocactus geometrizans* froze on the tips and rib edges to a chalky white. Others were fine. Surprisingly, the monstrous form seems to have had less damage, and where there was tip damage, they are already showing new growth.

Bismarckia palms have been planted recently around town...apparently an expensive mistake. On the other hand, the striking Mexican Blue Palm (*Brahea armata*) with similarly colored foliage has come through undamaged, as have almost all the other Baja plants. Damage on a large *Pachycormus discolor* has yet to be determined but a small

one in a more protected location is fine. A Madagascar ocotillo (*Alluaudia procera*) has some frozen branch tips and lots of brown leaves on an 8 ft plant but new green leaves are already out to 6 ft.