

Coastal Gardener Column

Franklin Laemmlen, Ph.D.

April 9, 2007

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Q: I lost more plants than I care to remember in the January 2007 freeze. Can you suggest some plants that I can use in my landscape so the carnage will be less the next time we have a freeze?

A: There are a few rules that you should follow when selecting replacement plants. One: Any plant that goes dormant for the winter months will most likely tolerate a hard freeze. Second: Choose plants that are native to your location or at least the region (Central Coast). Third: Choose plants that survive as bulbs, rhizomes, corms or other underground structures during the winter, and fourth: Avoid tropical and semi-tropical plants. The Coastal Gardener has some lists of native and other landscape plants recommended for the Central Coast. Contact me if you wish to receive these lists. Also there are many references, which will give the climatic zones in which particular plants survive. I like the Sunset Western Garden Book. It provides information about the Central Coast, and all plants listed have information about the climatic zones in which they will survive “under normal circumstances.”

Q: I have an apricot tree. It is now leafed out and the small fruit is above marble-sized. Within the last week to ten days two limbs on the tree collapsed, i.e., the leaves wilted and died. What is the cause?

A: The most common cause of the limb collapse you describe is “brown rot.” Most gardeners are familiar with the fruit rot stage of brown rot, where the ripe fruit develops brown rotted areas sometimes while still on the tree and often when the fruit is on the kitchen counter waiting to be eaten. The fungus that causes this disease can also attack the twigs and small branches of your apricot. My guess is that if you inspect the area of the collapsed branch at the spot where live and dead branch meet, you will find the branch is enlarged and has several small to large fissures and cracks that go deep into the branch. This is the site of a brown rot

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fungus infection that probably happened one to two years ago. The fungus is most active in springtime, and this spring it succeeded in girdling and killing the branch.

What to do! The branch infections cannot be cured. So the immediate treatment is to prune off the collapsed limb. Since the fungus may be active in limb tissues outside the obviously cankered area, the pruning cut should be made at least one inch into the healthy branch below the visible cankered area. If the canker is gumming or oozing, indicating current fungus activity, a cut two inches below the canker is suggested. The collapsed limb and canker should be removed to the green waste container. Do not leave it under the tree as the fungus can still be actively producing spores in the dead wood.

Finally, the tree should be sprayed with chlorothalonil, captan or a copper fungicide to reduce the chances of new twig and fruit infections. Next spring (2008) spray the tree with one of the above fungicides when the tree is at 90 – 100% bloom. This is the optimum time to prevent new brown rot twig and fruit infections.

Send your landscape and garden questions to: **The Coastal Gardener, 624-A West Foster Road, Santa Maria, CA 93455.**