

Q: My Eureka lemon tree was badly frozen back by this past winter's frost. It is in a half-wine barrel. I haven't pruned, but there are tiny new leaves emerging from the main branches the small branches have turned brown and all their leaves have fallen off. I am itching to prune and fertilize, but don't want to damage the tree further. When will I be able to prune the dead wood, and when should I start fertilizing?

A: It is tempting to say 'Hide the Pruners,' but it is very hard to look at brown stems. Hold off as long as you can, but as Dr. Raabe, Plant Pathology emeritus professor from UC Berkeley would say – "dead is dead." The question is – how do you determine what is dead?

The recommendation is to wait for several more months before giving in to your need to prune. However, if the small branches are brown and inflexible, it is unlikely that you have viable cambium. 'Cambium' is the green layer of cells you will find just under the outer bark. Scratch one of the main stems lightly with a fingernail, and you will see the green cambium layer. If that is visible, the stem is still alive even if the leaves are dead. Cells in the cambial tissue carry food and water throughout the plant, and are necessary for survival. Dead is dead. Dead branches can be pruned off.

The new leaves you are seeing are a very good sign. Do not fertilize at this time. Once the new leaves have emerged, fertilize at about ½ strength, using any of the good citrus fertilizers on the market. Fertilize at half strength until the tree has leafed all the way out, then resume your usual fertilizing routine.

Make sure that your tree does not dry out. Trees in containers need particular attention to irrigation, and they are more susceptible to drought with their reduced root zone. Maintain a 3" mulch under the canopy of the tree, using an acidic mulch such as pine needles. Watch out for snail and slug damage, and if you see the slime trails, bait with an iron phosphate bait. If your tree is in a full sun area, you might want to consider moving it into a part-shade area so that the trunk does not sunburn. You can also paint the trunk with diluted white latex paint to prevent sunburn. The latex paint should not harm the newly emerging leaves.

Next winter consider moving the tree to a protected site or wrapping outdoor Christmas lights throughout the canopy to provide a little frost protection. The Master Gardener office has a handout on growing Citrus in Contra Costa County available for free. You can call and request a copy. The telephone number is (925) 646-6586.