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Time to prepare for winter

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Central Florida's Agri-Leader

While it's not easy to predict the weather, one thing's for sure: Winter months can be cold in Florida, so preparations are in order.

Although last year was a cold one, this year the news is better. According to AgroClimate, there is more than a 50 percent chance of La NiÃ±a redeveloping this fall and winter, bringing drier and warmer than normal weather and climate patterns to Florida and other coastal areas of the Southeast, Texas and the desert Southwest.

However, before you put away your parka, The Farmer's Almanac predicts a colder year for South Florida: "Winter temperatures will be above normal in the north and below normal in the south, with below-normal rainfall."

Last year's unseasonably cold weather required strong measures to protect citrus, sugarcane, strawberries, vegetables, ornamentals and nursery crops. Farmers brought out frost cloths (breathable thermal blankets), overhead sprinklers, and helicopters to protect crops from devastation.

Still, the December cold wave was expensive, costing Florida growers about $115 million, with record cold temperatures damaging fruits, vegetables and citrus foliage, according to media reports. According to the NOAA National Climatic Data Center, last December was the third coldest on record in the Southeast U.S., and the coldest on record in Florida and Georgia.

"Last year, we used thermal blankets to cover our crops," said David St. Pierre of Campbell Farms in Okeechobee, who grows potatoes on 450 acres.

The blankets are spread on top of the crops and insulate the area around plants to protect them from frost. St. Pierre also raised the water level in the ditches in order to raise the temperature of the soil.

"We do the best we can with Mother Nature," he added.

William Moore of Bluefield Organic Farms, a 585-acre farm also in Okeechobee, turned to the newer technology of using micro-jet irrigation for frost protection.

"The jets were mounted on elevated stakes, turning it into an overhead irrigation system, which covered the plants with water," said Moore, who grows citrus, hay and organics such as blueberries and blackberries.

The southern parts of Florida opted for low-flying helicopters to keep crops such as sweet corn and green beans warm.

"Helicopters raise the temperature 3 to 4 degrees by blowing warm air down on the crops," said Paul Allen of R.C. Hatton Farms, located in south Florida and south Georgia. "However, they will not work in windy conditions."

Furthermore, helicopters are expensive, ranging between $800 and $1,500 per hour, depending on the size. When using helicopters, "one must really use a lot of foresight to judge the market as to whether or not it will pay off, that is, if the crops survive," said Allen, whose 13,000-14,000 acres grow sugar cane, sweet corn, green beans, celery and field corn.

During a late frost, Roth Farms in Belle Glade, a 5,000-acre farm, used a cultivator to cover the crops with dirt.

"The whole 2,500 acres of sweet corn was covered with dirt, while seasonal workers then uncovered it by hand," said Rick Roth. This process was time-consuming and expensive, but effective. Roth's family has been farming lettuce, leafy vegetables, radishes, green beans, rice, palm trees, sugar cane, corn and more for generations.

High tunnels, or "hoop houses," are unheated greenhouses that can be also implemented during the cold season. The tunnels help keep plants warm and extend growing seasons â thanks to a plastic film covering. Heaters or torches are also used with citrus and other fruit trees. Plants can also be wrapped in thermal materials or covered in organic materials, like dirt.

Daniel F. Culbert, an environmental horticulture agent with the Okeechobee Extension Service, said, "No matter what the weather, it's important to plant the right plants at the right time."

He recommends checking the USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map, where plants are listed under the coldest zones in which they normally succeed. The map is a guide that can help one decide what to plant and how to protect the temperature of the crop.

"If you lose a plant, view it as an opportunity to try something new, different, and hopefully, better-adapted to the place where you live," Culbert added.