



*Left, familiar sight in Houston gardens. Center two: scratch test, look for green.
Right: editor's Mexican bauhinia (orchid tree) returned after two years. "I never gave up on it!"*

IS IT DEAD-DEAD? OR JUST DORMANT?

By Barbara Canetti

[Galveston County Master Gardener](#)

Sometimes that sad, droopy, brown plant can surprise you. It may look dead, after the two super cold snaps in the Greater Houston area this season. But those plants may be more resilient than you think. Don't be too quick to toss them away.

Plants and trees don't exhibit any obvious vital signs - heartbeats or pulses -- but there are subtle hints that could indicate a problem.

- **First, a visual inspection:** has the plant lost many leaves? Are the remaining leaves brown or yellowing? These could be signs of dying or they could be natural indications of dormancy.
- **Look further, and check the stems.** Are they good color- preferably green? Are they sturdy, rather than mushy or brittle? Is the stem firm yet pliable? Are there soft spots on the stem or branches? Do a scratch test: with a fingernail, scratch a small portion of the stem. If the innards are green, the plant is still viable. If it is white or brown, say good-bye to it.



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- **If there are buds on the plant, note their condition.** If they are flaky, brittle or burned, remove them. The plant may be unsightly, but it may not be dead.
- **Next, examine the roots.** Are they still pliable and firm, or have they discolored and are fraying? Sometimes the damage to the roots is severe enough that they begin to rot. There would be a distinct, earthy smell if that happens. Leaves on the plant could be brown but the plant should be fine if it has a healthy root system.

If there is a possibility that the plant is still alive, it may just need some TLC. Cut away that portion of the stems that looked dead, trimming away a few inches at a time and moving closer and closer to the roots. Leave at least 2-inches of stem in the soil.

Remove any rot and apply fungicide if necessary. Also, check for any bug infestations or insects (aphids) and remove them.

If possible, re-pot the plant and place it in a protected area with indirect light. Water only if the soil is dry but don't let it dry out. Within a month, it will be evident if the plant will make it. New shoots and leaves will appear. Cut away any old growth that is not producing stems or leaves.

Remember, if the plant is dormant, it is resting. As the spring comes closer, it will start showing more signs of life. Old leaves will wilt and fade but the new leaves need to be strong and crisp.

And, as bad as the garden may look now -- everything brown and sorry-looking -- leave it alone for a few more weeks.

According to the Old Farmer's Almanac, the last frost date for the Houston area is Feb. 3. Wait until then before conducting any major garden cleanup.