

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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Freeze Frame

Chris Beytes

Photography by Greg Ragan

Ice protects 150,000 calibrachoa hanging baskets from freezing at Metrolina Greenhouses in Huntersville, North Carolina, where the temperature dipped to about 19F for several hours overnight between Saturday and Sunday, March 12 and 13.

Metrolina grower Greg Ragan, who oversees the 11-acre field, said he started the sprinkler system at just before 7:00 p.m. when the temperature hit 32F, and he let it run for about 16 hours until the plants were thawed out. "We just kept the system running nonstop and we built layer upon layer of ice."

Greg, a 17-year veteran of Metrolina, explained that calibrachoa will be cold-damaged at 28F. "When we build the layers of ice on top of the plants, it maintains a temperature between 31F and 32F, so, in theory, it creates a protective boundary from the colder air temperatures that surround the plant."

To prevent disease and leaching from all that water, Greg applied a fungicide 24 hours prior to starting the irrigation process. The icing was done with a liquid fertilizer to minimize leaching and make sure the plants had food as they dried out.

"From what I've seen this morning, the plants are looking great!" Greg told us on Monday after the freeze. He says this is the longest they've held ice on such a crop, so he's going to keep monitoring them to make sure there's no damage. As a benefit, some frost can make a crop a bit hardier.

Greg snapped this photo and others overnight as the crop froze and the sun rose. He posted them to his social media accounts, which is where we found this stunner.

"Everybody was loving it and commenting on it," Greg said of the response to his photos. "It was cool!" **GT**

