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# Springtime and necessary tarp shenanigans

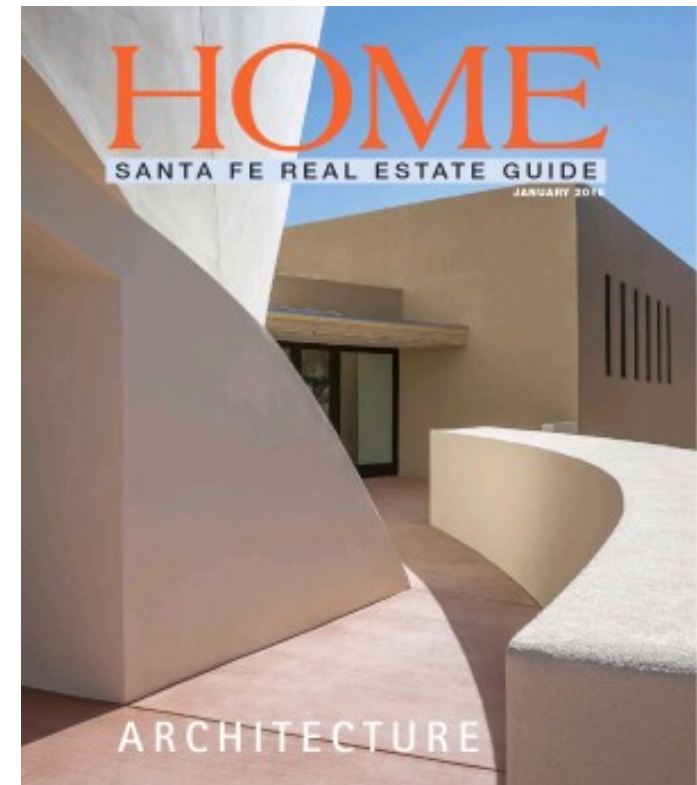
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Posted: Sunday, May 3, 2015 6:00 am

Nate Downey/For The New Mexican

Santa Fe is almost 700 miles from nearest port, but here in the high desert we batten down our hatches like Gilligan on The Minnow. Every New Mexican gardener with an itch to start early knows what I mean. You check the forecast. You overhear it at the farmers' market. You see it on Facebook. Maybe you sense a simple tingle in your toes.

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Eeeee, you realize, it's about to get cold!

This spring was classic. There we were, enjoying that long string of warm days and near-balmy nights. Our self-seeding kale, chard, and lettuce were going strong. Peas were up. Even a goodly number of fall-planted starts had survived a winter of much neglect. But, clearly, a significant cold front would soon drop in. All veggie beds would need their covers tucked in and something had to be done to protect the flowering fruit trees.

My favorite technique for preventing frost-burnt blossoms comes from the opening scene of a Chekhov short story. An entire community is out in an orchard at night. All hands are on deck as people struggle to cover the trees with water.

“Water?” you ask. “Doesn't water freeze, and isn't that what we're trying to avoid?”

Yes, water freezes. But this means water can protect buds from a light frost. By acting as a physical barrier through which freezing temperatures must first travel, water, as it does so often in the desert, can save the day.

Flowering trees, especially dwarf varieties, can also be sheltered with tarps, fabric, or similar materials. If your trees are impractically large to cover completely, select easily reachable, blossom-filled branches for a quick wrap-up. The simple chore could make the difference between no crop and months of yummy applesauce.

This year, thanks to an old broken leg, I felt the freeze coming, so I rounded up my two sons, a tall friend, a ladder, some bungees, and an immense tarp. It was a wildly windy April afternoon, and the tree was enormous and completely covered with luscious blooms. One boy manned the ladder, another stood on a bunny hutch at the edge of the great apple's canopy. Using thin branches on a neighboring elm and tension on the tarp, our valiant friend balanced precariously

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on a nearby six-foot garden wall.



Positioned near the top of the tree and screaming like Ahab, I was heaving and hoeing a 12-foot pole to try to force the tarp over the tree's tallest branches. Forty minutes and several close calls later, we were fully battened down, ready to withstand some reasonably rough weather. In the morning, we had won the battle of the light frost. But spring was not over.

The effort had been epic, and the story may go down in family lore. But we won't know for sure until the last frost of the spring has passed or really until the crop comes in this fall, or until the bungees snap with the next big wind, and a monstrous tarp is found in the neighbor's yard or blowing down the street.

Nate Downey, the author of Harvest the Rain, has been a local landscape consultant, designer, and contractor since 1992. He can be reached at 505-690-7939 or via [www.permadesign.com](http://www.permadesign.com).

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