

# Warm winter, pesty spring?



Pete Lind of the Centerville Green House says mild winters might lead to increase in harmful fungus.

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If it feels like spring to people, how does it seem to the plants and trees in our yards? Will a sudden return to subfreezing temperatures damage the flowers beginning to emerge?

Peter Lind of the Centerville Green House says trees and shrubs begin and end their dormancy based not just on temperatures, but by the length of daylight. He doesn't think the recent stretch of comparative warm weather will harm them.

Newly planted trees can be hurt or even die if the unfrozen ground is dry, but the recent rains have eased that worry.

The plummeting night temperatures of below 10 degrees in early December were cold enough for the trees to enter their second phase of dormancy. In New York, where warm temperatures are breaking records, there is worry that many of the state's trees haven't entered this second phase of dormancy that lowers the temperature at which they freeze. If plants have not entered this second phase, their cells can rupture when temperatures plunge.

According to the Iowa State Extension Service, lengthy periods of mild winter weather can de-acclimate plants. This would again make them vulnerable to damage from rapid temperature drops.

Bulb plants like crocus and daffodils might not bloom as well this spring when the return to colder temperatures freeze of any premature sproutings, Lind said, but it will not kill the plants.

A common perception is that mild winters will mean a bumper crop of

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pests. Lind said he worries more about blights and molds that can damage, even kill everything from roses to oak trees. Fungus continue to thrive in the unfrozen soil and compost. Gardeners should be alert to odd marks on sprouting leaves in the spring, either from insect or fungus damage. Fungicides and pesticides could then be applied.

An example is Stewart's bacterial wilt - often a problem after mild winters. It can reduce yields or even kill corn. The disease mostly spreads by way of the corn flea beetle.

Oak wilt could also be more of a problem due to a mild winter. It is usually safe to trim oaks this time of year, but because of the warmer temperatures, it should be postponed to when temperatures again drop.

And while mild winters might increase populations of harmful insects, these same favorable conditions allow the survival of beneficial insects.

Vera Krischik, University of Minnesota Extension entomologist, reports that, "Mild winters seem to set up a bit of a chess game, with more total insects surviving, but at the same time this higher population

includes more beneficial insects."

A beneficial insect that usually flourishes after mild winters is the multicolored Asian lady beetles. The beetles are about 1/3-inch long. They are a little larger than most other lady beetles and have 19 black spots on their backs. The multicolored Asian lady beetles feed on harmful aphids.

One does not have to always resort to chemicals to battle insects that are harmful to plants. Beneficial insects that feast on such pests as aphids and whiteflies can be encouraged by having the right plants that offer them food and shelter.

These good bugs include hover flies, parasitic wasps, pirate bugs, lady beetles, lacewings and soldier bugs.

Having a wide variety of such plants is the key to attracting beneficial bugs throughout the growing season - like coriander, cosmos, bishop's weed, common fennel and yarrow.

The praying mantis, a voracious carnivore, can be purchased in the egg form for seeding in gardens.

Some experts say that mild or harsh winters aren't the real deciding factors in summer insect populations — but the spring conditions.

A wet spring leads to a high early number of mosquitoes. An early, warm spring increases the normal population of yellowjackets.

Cold, wet springs can increase the numbers of some pest insects, and decrease others.

Still, to paraphrase an old saying, everyone talks about the weather, but nobody can do anything about it. So for now, just enjoy the mild temperatures while you can - there is still plenty of winter left.