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SPRING'S NOT HERE YET!

By Joel W. Allen, Extension Educator

I am sure you would agree we have had some unseasonably winter weather the past couple of months. Yes, we had a cold spell and some snow in December and a few snow falls since, but on the whole, it's been a pretty warm winter. That is certainly evident by the amount of growth some of our trees, shrubs, and flowers have had. The daffodils between the shop and parking lot here at Cooperative Extension are up about 10 inches and the hyacinths are also popping up through the soil. However, by the time you read this, according to the advance weather forecast anyway, they will have been "shocked" back into winter following some pretty serious cold temperatures over the weekend. Temperatures in the single digits are hard to take after last week's high 50's.

One customer indicated to me the other day that it seems to her "global warming" is very evident. I shared with her an article that appeared in my hometown newspaper which runs a weekly column "In Times Past." It stated that according to the paper of January 26, 1905, it was 62 degrees in my hometown in Oneida County, New York. In fact, they were experiencing a warm spell at that time similar to what we've just been through so I guess the weather people are correct in stating these winter warm spells are cyclic. According to the calendar, spring is still several weeks away.

What can one do with flowers and plants that have started to grow? In a word - nothing! Well, that's not exactly true. For trees and shrubs, including fruit trees and plants, there really isn't much one can do other than install some kind of wind protection, because if their buds have begun to break dormancy and swell, they will be exceptionally sensitive to cold, dry winds. Burlap screens, if not installed last fall, could still be put up and would help. Perennials and bulbs that have begun to pop up and show green, will most likely stop growing. However, any green tissue showing will be "burned" by cold temperatures and winds. One could mulch or cover them with snow, if available, or leaves or boughs of evergreen trees that might be around. This would be a good job for the branches of the old Christmas tree, for example. The branches should be cut off the tree and laid on top of the green shoots. You want to make sure the ground is cold again, however, before you mulch because we know the mulch will help retain the soil temperature and to stop growth, it needs to be cold.

We would expect some burning of the green tissue when cold temperatures and wind return. What will result once "normal" growing conditions arrive will probably be brown foliage but that shouldn't cause any long term damage to perennials or bulbs, or trees or shrubs, for that matter. Although, severe damage to fruit crops can occur, depending upon how far out of dormancy they have grown..

I mentioned mulching with snow. Snow is a great insulator so as you shovel or plow your walks and driveways the rest of the winter, don't hesitate to pile the snow onto your perennial and bulb beds. Be sure, however, that no salt or other snow-melting material is in that snow which could contaminate the soil where it is piled.

There have also been a number of questions about tree and shrub damage so far this winter. While we really haven't had a lot of snow, there seems to be a fair amount of damage evident on lawns and along the roadways. It really doesn't take much heavy wet snow to break branches and with the exception of putting up snow "tepees" or braces under branches, there is not much one can do to avoid this damage. It is Mother Nature's way of "pruning," albeit ragged and careless. I think many of us still remember the early October snow storm in 1987 and the damage it did to trees and shrubs all over Columbia County. You can still see the remnants of that damage in our woods and forests and on many yard trees and ornamentals. Continue to collect the branches and debris that have accumulated in your yard and when you find the time and the spirit moves you, why not consider making clean cuts on those many broken branches. You need not try to do this all at once, but we do know a clean cut has the potential to heal quicker than a jagged or rough one so your efforts should benefit the tree or shrub. And there is no need to use any sort of tree wound material. While most trees and shrubs have proper pruning/shaping times, correcting damage caused by wind, snow, etc. can be done anytime. Happy Gardening!

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