

Effects of Early Spring Weather

By Susan Camp

Saturday afternoon was gorgeous, and not at all like an expected late February day. If I hadn't known better, I might have thought it was early April. Jim and I worked outside for a few hours, relishing the warmth and fresh air. Later the massive storm came roaring in, bringing black clouds, tree-whipping wind and lashing rain, and leaving us with a more seasonal temperature on Sunday.

I noticed that besides the daffodils, more of which are opening daily, the hydrangeas are in bud. The Old Garden Roses are putting out new leaves and shoots, and, of course, the camellias are in full bloom. The trees, too, are beginning to show signs of spring: rosy, baby buds on the dwarf Japanese maple, dogwood, and fringe tree. New growth is popping out on the big, old beeches, even though they are still holding on to last summer's pale, papery leaves.

While warm weather and the arrival of early budding provides us with reasons to spend time in the garden, there remains the possibility of a late killing frost, like the one a few years ago that destroyed mature rosemary bushes and hydrangea buds throughout the region. In fact, in USDA Hardiness Zone 7b, the last frost risk date is listed as April 11th, although there is a small chance of frost until around April 22nd.

What are some possible effects of uninterrupted early spring-like weather? And what will happen to our plants, shrubs, and trees, besides frost-nipped buds, if warm days are followed by a cold snap?

If the warm weather continues, one important effect for Gloucester residents will be a sparse daffodil harvest for the annual Daffodil Festival on April 1st and 2nd. Daffodils, tulips, and hyacinths develop their flowers during the winter and will not rebloom, leaving the landscape and the festival with fewer blooming spring bulbs for visitors to purchase and enjoy. On the brighter side, some plants that usually don't survive long, cold winters may live through warm winters and spring-like weather.

One surprise that home gardeners will not find pleasant is an increased number of insect pests, including mosquitoes and aphids. Ticks will be out and about, too. A warm day is a good time to empty standing water from flowerpots, buckets, or other containers left out over the winter. Scrub out birdbaths, too, and fill with fresh water for returning birds. Wet leaves and other debris provide fine breeding spots for mosquitoes. Rake up dead leaves and compost them or dig them into flower or vegetable beds. Bag or burn diseased plant debris.

While several authors suggest beginning spring cleanup by raking up all leaf litter that can serve as habitat for insect pests and diseases, I must add a caveat here. If you remove all protection from around your perennials, shrubs, and small trees, you run the risk of leaving them unprotected if the temperature suddenly drops below freezing, which it did on Sunday and Monday.

Some home gardeners will be tempted to set plants out before the recommended planting dates. If warm weather continues, an early harvest may be the result. If a cold snap occurs, early-bird farmers will need to cover new plants to protect them from frost.

A temperature plunge after several warm days will cause spring-flowering shrubs and fruit trees that bloomed early to drop their blossoms, leading to smaller tree fruit harvests during the summer.

While the shrubs and smaller, flowering trees will suffer if we have a frost after they have budded, the larger trees will weather the temperature change with few problems. Many species of large trees can withstand almost any weather assault, with the exceptions of lightning and ice storms.

We can't control the temperature ups and downs, but we can enjoy the beauty of the warm, sunny days, while preparing for a few disappointments in the garden if winter shows up again.

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