

A Balmy New Year

By Susan Camp

A popular topic for discussion at holiday parties and family dinners this season is the unseasonably warm December weather, and if National Weather Service predictions are correct, the spring-like temperatures will continue for several more days. When I searched online for information about warm December weather, I was surprised to discover that 2007 and 2012 both were balmy years. I tend to remember only the cold, snowy Christmases.

Yesterday evening, I heard a peep frog choir singing their springtime song. They are supposed to be sleeping right now. As I walked outside today to see how the garden is faring, I noticed a few pale purple blossoms on a rosemary bush and the soft, green leaves of daffodils at least six inches tall. Two camellias that usually bloom in February are covered in blossoms, and one fall-blooming azalea is still flowering.

We can't expect the exceptionally warm temperatures to last throughout the winter, so what are the implications for the flora and fauna on the Middle Peninsula and much of the upper south and northeast? According to a National Wildlife Federation article, seasonal events such as breeding, hibernation, migration, and metamorphosis in animals, birds, and insects, and blooming and leaf drop in plants recur regularly, with clockwork-like precision. The amount of sunlight and precipitation, working in conjunction with temperature, are the primary non-biological factors affecting the timing of life cycle events. If unseasonable weather prevails for a time, then suddenly changes, all species of animals and plants living in that area can be affected.

Take those little frogs, singing so prettily right now, reminding us of spring. If they breed too early and a sudden cold spell arrives, all of the frogs that aren't hibernating could die, leaving snakes and raptors without a ready supply of food. A prolonged warm spell could mean a bumper crop of mosquitoes later in the year and if the frog population has dropped, well, you get the idea. In other words, nature is not a vacuum; all life is related.

What are some other possible effects of a warm winter followed by frigid temperatures? The Cornell University Department of Horticulture publication "Will Warm Winter Wither Plants?" provides helpful information for gardeners.

Bulbs, such as hyacinths and early daffodils probably will survive. Leaf damage may occur, but flower buds are protected underground. Perennial flowers will sustain little damage unless buds have emerged, but should recover, especially if they are covered with mulch or leaves. Cold winter weather helps to keep plant diseases and insects in check. Warm temperatures allow them to thrive and beneficial insects may get out of sync with the insect pests they consume, so spring and summer vegetable crops could be affected.

Tree fruit production will decrease if buds appear early, then temperatures drop below freezing. Small fruits such as strawberries and blueberries should survive, but raspberry and blackberry canes may die from the top down. They will produce new canes in the spring, but no berries until the next summer.

Deciduous trees and shrubs may bloom early, but the long term health of most will not be affected. Boxwood (*Buxus* sp.), popular in Tidewater gardens, is an exception. When boxwood emerges from dormancy, the tissues fill with water, which freezes when the temperature drops, causing branches to split. Cold, dry winds dehydrate leaves and branches, leading to winter burn. If a boxwood shrub sustains both types of injury, it may die. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-500 addresses winter injury to trees and shrubs.

Warm temperatures now will encourage root growth in established lawns, as well as fall-planted seedlings. If the winter temperatures drop gradually, turf grasses should “harden off” and survive. A precipitous drop could lead to damage caused by freezing, but lawns should recover, especially if they are not walked on.

We can't control the weather or what happens in the garden, but we can enjoy these warm December days. Have a happy, balmy New Year!

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