

# IS SPRING COMING TOO SOON?

One glorious daffodil in full bloom the second week in February; crocus popping up all over the place. Hellebores, snowdrops, winter aconite, and witch hazel in full flower several weeks before expected. I'm not complaining. This mild winter has been a pleasure, but I am worried about the way it will affect my garden in the long term.



We might be lucky and simply slide into spring. Walk outside and see what's already coming up. On the other hand, an unexpected frost can kill or damage all those emerging plants. While it's a good idea to remove mulch from perennial beds and around bulbs as green shoots begin to appear, keep it at the edges of the bed so it can be raked back temporarily in case of a cold snap. If perennials emerge too early and are damaged by an unexpected frost, they will recover but probably won't bloom this year. Some species of hydrangeas are particularly susceptible to sudden frost. When a major drop in temperature is predicted, cover your bushes with an old blanket or several layers of plastic till it warms up. Bulbs, of course, need no extra protection.

A big problem for me is over-optimism. Even though I know I shouldn't start seeds outdoors or bring out the seeds I've started inside too soon, I usually succumb to temptation. Our frost date is on or before April 23-28th, so it certainly makes sense to wait at least a few weeks. Another mild winter pitfall is that local nurseries will probably begin selling annuals earlier than usual. Despite my desire for instant gratification, I know I have to wait; one frost will decimate them or cause botrytis, a gray mold fungus. Pansies are the exception. Soon, I'll put them in a sheltered part of the garden.



If you're a vegetable lover, start indoor seeds of peppers, early tomatoes, eggplants, celery, broccoli, and cauliflower. If you're up for Russian roulette, plant spinach and early lettuce outside. Keep them in a pot, so they can be moved if the weather changes.

If there's a prediction for frost with no rain, water everything thoroughly. Plants can't pull water from the soil when it is frozen, so they need extra help. When it becomes windy as well as cold, winter dessication may occur on shrubs, especially evergreens, if they are not irrigated.

Crepe myrtles do tend to get winter damage. Cut back the dead branches. If you are in doubt, use your fingernail to peel back a tiny sliver of the bark to determine if it's still green underneath. Don't worry if the leaves on your flowering shrubs have holes in them. It's probably caused by changes in the temperature.



Unfortunately, this year's weather has some very noxious side effects. Annoying insects, such as mosquitoes, fleas, and ticks, will emerge earlier than usual. Winter dormant insects, such as woolly adelgids, will be prolific. Their numbers are usually lessened by harsh winters. Look for their egg sacs, resembling cotton swab tips, on hemlock tips and remove. Check for tent caterpillar egg masses (one inch long, encircling twigs) on black cherry, choke cherry, apple, and other fruit and ornamental trees. Scrape and destroy. Remove gypsy moth larvae (tan-colored clusters on the underside of branches, tree trunks, fences, stone walls, or any protected place). They prefer oak, willow, poplar, gray birch, apple, and larch.

Chinch bugs and dollar spots may emerge earlier than usual on your lawn. It won't hurt to

rake and mow it while it is dormant, which will also encourage growth. Do not apply fertilizer till after the beginning of April.

Now is a good time to bring your indoor plants outside for a little R & R. Why shouldn't they have a little vacation? Put them in the sun for the day and bring them back in at night. This is not recommended for tropicals.

Most of this information was provided by Tamson Yeh, Turf and Land Management Specialist at Cornell Cooperative Extension for Suffolk County. Now is a good time to get your soil tested, which they will do at the Cooperative Extension. The Horticulture Information Line: 631-581-4223; Wednesday through Friday--8:45 am to 11:45 am & 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm, is most helpful in providing answers to your questions.

