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In Your Garden Mild Winter Good for People, Not Plants

Midwesterners, accustomed to harsh winters are breathing a sigh of relief because of the unusually mild weather so far this year. Each day means spring is that much closer and the chance of extended foul weather diminished.

Yet according to James A. Fizzell, University of Illinois Horticulturist in Cook County, the mild weather could spell trouble for plantings. Fizzell says the cold weather in November and more recent cold nights have been enough to satisfy the low-temperature needs of many kinds of plants. Since plants are vernalized, warm days make them think spring has arrived. Buds of some lilacs and pussy willows have begun to swell. If you cut some of these branches, you can force them into bloom indoors, Fizzell adds.

The problems arise, warns Fizzell, when temperatures suddenly drop to much below normal. This could happen any day. Those of us who know Chicago weather learn to expect the worst. Should this happen, semi-dormant buds will be killed and tender twigs and trunks will be sensitized to invasion by cankering organisms. The result will be lack of flowers, late leafing out, and die-back of twigs and branches next summer.

Fizzell thinks turfgrass and perennials are safe so far, because soils are not frozen and are moist enough to keep plants from drying out. There has been little frost heaving. But, it is much safer to have the 4 to 6 inch blanket of snow protecting these plants if severe weather is in the offering.

Take advantage of any nice weather by inspecting your plantings and making any repairs you can. Firm heaved plants, water if needed, and re-apply rabbit repellent.

Fizzell reports that the cold snap in November severely damaged his rose plantings which were in full leaf and bloom. If this has happened to you, get a rose plant order in now. Should the damage be widespread as it was last year, roses might be in short supply in spring.

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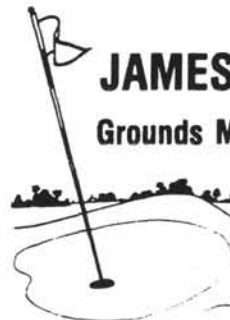
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