

## Is My Redbud Tree Dead?

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

This past winter was rough on plants, especially woody trees and shrubs. It's hard to say exactly what the main problem was. While we had okay rainfall early last fall, we were significantly below average over the late fall and winter months, essentially just two thirds of normal. So soil moisture conditions have not been good.

On top of that, the temperatures have been drastically all over the board. October was well above normal, then temperatures plummeted in November and stayed cold. December bounced back up well above normal, January was up, February was way down and then March was back up. When you have abnormally warm weather followed by abrupt cold spells, plants have problems adjusting. While all of this is fascinating, it has nothing to do with why many redbud trees did not bloom very well this spring. But hang on to that information as it will become important in just a moment!

I had several redbuds of my own that did not bloom well this spring. These were also the same redbuds that bloomed heavily last year and carried very heavy seed pod crops into winter. It is well known that in many fruiting species, the presence of a heavy fruit crop (in the case of a redbud tree, seed pods) in one year, suppresses flower development. In essence, a tree bears heavily one year and then gets a year off to recover. Flower bud development occurs during the summer for the blossoms that will bloom the following spring. So the presence of a heavy seed pod load last year more than likely reduced the development of flowers so there weren't as many flower buds this year.

My own trees, and all the others that I have looked at, appear to be leafing out just fine. Watering the tree, if we don't get good rain, and fertilizing lightly in the next few weeks should encourage the tree to produce lots of flower buds for next year. If your redbud tree doesn't leaf out in the next few weeks, then there indeed is a problem and you need to give me a call.

Where the temperature yo-yo and low precipitation does seem to be having an impact is on shrubs and perhaps perennial flowers. I have seen a lot of shrubs that froze back to the ground this year. Many different species are involved which pretty well eliminates the possibility that we have a disease issue. I've seen damage in some spirea species, crape myrtle, weigela, butterfly bush and golden privet to mention a few. I've seen an unusually high number of dead tips on juniper shrubs also. All of this damage is probably the result of the dry weather and variable temperatures.

At this point all woody shrubs should be at least starting to leaf out. If yours aren't, start cutting back until you are getting to green tissue. If you get back to three inch stubs and still no apparent green tissue, stop! You'll then need to wait and see if you start to get new shoots coming up from the roots. I had a butterfly bush at my office that was totally dead above the ground but new shoots are now coming up from ground level.

Our weather is harsh on many plant species. In many cases I think some late fall and mid winter watering may have helped reduce the amount of winter injury. Water the plants slowly and deeply now, but don't drown them. Then remember that if next fall is dry again, take the time to do some late fall and winter watering!