

Winter is Nature's Reset Button

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

We all like to complain about the winter weather, myself included. I find I get colder more easily, I dislike snow and ice and the problems they bring with walking and driving, and too many days are just kind of dreary. Then I have to take a moment and remind myself, we need winter weather. We need the cold. We need the cycle of long nights and short days, and we need the moisture that comes in the snow. Winter, in our area, is a season of rest, and a time when Mother Nature essentially hits the reset button to start the next cycle of life.

Contrary to what a lot of people think, many insects survive our wintery cold weather just fine. There are those species that do not overwinter in Kansas. They fly in from the south, or are blown in, every spring and summer. But most of our insects are designed to overwinter here just fine. They move into sheltered areas and essentially hibernate either as adults (ladybugs), immature larvae (grubs), or in a pupae or cocoon (moths), or as eggs (grasshoppers). Cold, and I mean really cold, 15 to 20 below like we saw last February, doesn't really impact the survival of these critters. They are more likely to be negatively impacted, especially those overwintering as adults, by a winter with a lot of warm and cold temperature fluctuations, like what we saw this January. But even then, the number that are actually lost, is a small fraction of the population.

Likewise, adapted plants are generally not bothered by cold winter temperatures. Sudden extreme cold in November or early warm ups in February or March followed by a cold snap can hurt a lot of flowering trees and shrubs though. What our winter weather does do is to keep certain warm loving invasive plants, like kudzu, from getting established in the state. Borderline plants certainly can be damaged by even our normal winter cold temperatures. In Oklahoma and Texas, crape myrtles make nice small trees. In our area, crape myrtles make nice shrubs!

Many plants need that cold weather to trigger them to bloom. Wheat needs a certain amount of chilling to trigger it to send up heads for grain production. Many peach cultivars need a certain amount of chilling. Many of our early spring flowering plants (weeds), need that cold treatment to get them to switch from vegetative growth to flowering. That combination of cold temperatures, followed by increasing daylight triggers a lot of things to start happening in plants.

The soil itself needs cold weather. Soil compaction can be a big problem anywhere that there is foot, animal or vehicular traffic, routinely, on the soil. Freezing and thawing (along with wetting and drying) can help to start developing cracks down through that compacted soils. It's not a perfect solution, especially with heavy compaction, but it certainly helps. Of course, wet soils will have more freezing and thawing action than dry soils because it's the water in the soil that is actually freezing. But every freeze thaw cycle helps a little bit and our weather with soil freezing for a few days and then thawing helps more than we may realize.

Bottom line is that we NEED winter. We may not LIKE winter, but we need it. The world around us needs it. Plants, animals, insects and even people, need the cycles of nature. Many of our plants need that period of rest to reset and trigger the next year of growth. There is some sense of invigoration that comes out of surviving the winter and starting a new year of growth. We shouldn't despise the winter, but view it as a road we must go down to reap the rewards on the other side. And we have to ask ourselves if the flowers of spring and the wonderful days would seem nearly as enjoyable if we hadn't traveled down that road called winter?