

COLUMNS

Campbell Vaughn: Augusta's early spring brings joy and plant worries

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Key Points

A cold snap could halt the blooming and fruiting process for trees, potentially ruining crops like peaches.

While the warm weather affects plants, insect populations are largely unaffected due to their survival strategies.

Homeowners are advised to apply pre-emergence for warm-season weeds sooner than usual due to rising soil temperatures.

It is the first of March, and I have bearded iris blooming in my yard. It has been blooming for two weeks.

All around Augusta, we are getting a little spring show in what could be seen as winter. I am enjoying it, but it is somehow making me nervous. I keep thinking it is going to get cold, yet the 10-day forecast says more springtime is coming to Augusta.

What is that going to mean for plant health and insect quantities?

Our biggest concern about the potential for more cold weather is the impact of potential freezes on flowers and developing fruit on trees.

Our last frost for winter for the past 12 years has been no earlier than March 8, and as late as April 10. That spells trouble for some of our plants.

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When the trees start blooming, next comes the fruit. This is part of the cycle that is critical for a crop. When a cold snap hits 28 degrees, all this blooming and fruiting comes to a halt, and we won't have peaches.

Plants were so dormant this winter because of the abundance of chill hours; any sign of warm weather gets plant ready to pop open. A lot of the saucer magnolias (*Magnolia x soulangeana*) put on a show with their purple and white blossoms, only to be decimated by a hard freeze in the past couple of weeks.

In our landscapes, our mophead hydrangeas (*Hydrangea macrophylla*) start putting out leaves when we have periods of warm weather, and they are very susceptible to freezes. They will put leaves back on if they get knocked back by frost, but don't expect the plants to look as nice for our Masters guests.

Just as our winter weeds really start taking off, we get ready for warm-season weeds. Soil temperature is on the rise and very close to 55 degrees, meaning warm-season weed seeds will start germinating soon.

My normal recommendation for pre-emergence for warm-season weeds is late February and into March. We need to get that pre-emergence out yesterday, or the weeds are going to be rough this year.

How about insect populations? Good news, winter weather has very little influence on insect populations if it is warm or extremely cold. Insects have developed excellent strategies to survive and are grouped into two categories: freeze-tolerant and freeze-avoiding.

Freeze-tolerant insects are able to withstand freezing conditions. These insects accumulate biological antifreeze in their cells before winter and use specialized carbohydrates to keep them from turning into tiny ice cubes. These compounds lower the freezing point of their body fluids, preventing ice crystals from forming inside the insects' cells and killing them.

Freeze-avoiding insects just don't hang around or expose themselves to cold conditions.

Monarch butterflies migrate in the fall to Mexico, where it is warm. This migration is very similar to the carpetbagger migration to Florida from the tundra above the Mason-Dixon Line.

Some insects, such as Japanese beetles, June bugs, and dung beetles, tap into the geothermal heat by burrowing into the ground to avoid a wintery death. The deeper you get in the soil, the steadier the temperature becomes.

The best predictor of insect survival is the conditions during insect emergence. They need food and need it quickly. For example, sometimes weather delays corn planting. This delay is detrimental to emerging corn rootworm larvae. If the insects do not have a food source, the first generation of the season will be greatly reduced.

This can also lead to reductions of beneficial insects, which feed on pest insects. Always cause and effect.

Predicting the long-term Georgia weather is near impossible, so I need to just enjoy this early spring.

A couple of fun outings for plant lovers are happening in the next week in the Camellia Room at Lookaway Inn at 103 West Forest Ave., North Augusta. Lookaway Inn hosts the grounds where Dr. Henry G. Mealing (1920s-1970s) lived when he propagated and named many camellias.

On March 10, 6 p.m., the President of the American Camellia Society, Forrest Latta from Mobile, Alabama, will be there to speak on Camellias. Latta wrote the book *Camellia Garden Field Guide* and is known to be a fantastic storyteller.

On March 14, along with warmer weather, Camellias are exploding, and you have a chance to enter your blooms to be judged, identified, or both from 9-11 a.m. at

the same location as Latta's talk. There will also be a world-famous Camellia vendor from Sylvania selling his products along with interesting speakers, vendors, and garden tours lasting until 4 p.m. Both events are free to all.