Insect Galls and Other Fun Things

by The Garden Hoe, Lis Friemoth

With the leaves gone, the sun out, and the air fresh - there were many opportunities to be outside checking on all of the cool, odd, and unusual things happening in the landscape. In the yard wanderings, you may have seen some unusual growths on the tree branches. And what about all of those plants budding and shooting new leaves out? And as there are not many other outside chores to keep the mind occupied and the hands out of trouble – these happenings may create more worry than is really necessary. In the long run, healthy plants will weather these pressures and be okay.

More than likely, any weird looking things on the trees were galls. Seeing unusual growths may cause some panic, so taking some time to understand what galls are and what needs to be done about them, may ease your mind a bit. Galls are best described as enlarged areas of tissue on leaves, stems, branches, flowers, fruit, and/or roots. The cause can be parasites of a bacterial, fungal or insect nature. The external structure of the gall may be smooth, fuzzy, round, flat, and/or elongated - as the parasite and host plant combinations dictate the outward appearance. And all parasites will have their preferred host plants. Hosts can be anything from water algae to lichens found in arid conditions – whatever the parasite wants. Invasion of the plant will occur in a way most consistent with feeding and/or reproduction habits – piercing, sucking, chewing, or internal tissue ovipositing are just few. After invasion, the plant responds with changes in cell structure designed to defend against, or compensate for, the parasite. So what does that mean? The plant tissue accommodates the foreign material (eggs or pathogens) by growing around it or changing cell structure to balance disruptions. Some examples of those commonly found in this area are nipple galls on maples, oak galls, and spruce adelgids. Fluctuations in gall populations are consistent with insect populations and levels of disease presence. And under normal circumstances, these growths are rather innocuous, health-wise. For those gardeners that love perfection in their plants, there are treatments that, when appropriately timed and applied, can minimize gall occurrences – but, really, why bother? It's mainly a cosmetic issue.

For those of you who are in a dither about the bulbs poking their brave little selves out of the ground - relax. Most hardy bulbs in this area will survive fine – their active growth season is fall through spring. And during this period, a nice amount of damp cold is needed for optimal bulb development, growth, and flowering. Just try to minimize compaction around the bulbs until spring arrives and use a bit of caution when trying to control the conditions of nature. What does that mean? Quit walking in the beds to check on them and try not to dig around in any snow or ice that fall on them - the cell structure will accommodate, but only without our inappropriate intervention. Those spring bloomers that really push hardiness zone limitations will probably have some issues. But, those are the risks run when playing around with plants. Covering bulbs or tender plants with a thick layer of mulch when the soil is not frozen may encourage some rodent infestations – and those buggers will love that juicy plant material. But, if you just cannot help yourself, and must cover some of the plants, use loose material – dried oak leaves or bows of evergreens.

Roses and lilacs popping new leaves out in January – hmmm…these foretell of an interesting season to come. During a normal, dormant, winter season, warmer conditions and balmy winds can cause severe desiccation in most plant material. So, imagine when off-season re-leafing occurs. This utilizes a large portion of stored carbohydrates that is needed by the plant for early spring growth. Without those carbohydrate stores, plant systems will go into stress when called upon to produce food. When those systems are able to immediately rejuvenate from readily available elements, there is less chance of stress induced tissue death. So, given the weather conditions of the past month or so, it is actually a good thing that there was some moisture available in the thawed soil. Do watch the plants as they burst into spring – they may need a bit of extra care and probably some pruning to remove the dead stuff from last month.

Seriously, is anyone worried about what will happen to the dandelions and other weeds if they come out too early? I know, I know - there are a handful of us strange ones that actually like those pretty yellow flowers. Not to worry, they will not disappear. Sorry, those of you who would love to get rid of them, this won't do it. But, treatment for dandelions (and garlic mustard!!!) at this time of the year may be an option - if the temperatures and other conditions are within labeled product limits. Check your labels or ask a professional for help.