



Gosh, but those 80 degree days felt good. We were fooled again (oh, when will we learn) into thinking that warm, spring weather had permanently arrived to the northern climes. The grass was greening up nicely, buds were breaking open on the fruit and ornamental trees, and the spring flowers were showing their lovely colors as they popped up to bask in the warm sunshine. And then boom – the cold descended, again. It certainly didn't make most of us happy, but at least we can add outer layers. Plants don't have that option. And as if low temperatures aren't enough, there are two other taxing inputs to count on for stressing the plants during cold spring weather – intense wind and human intervention. High winds cause severe desiccation on tender (and succulent) new tissue, especially when coupled with very cold temperatures. Add kindly human intent in the form of unsupported covers and you have upgraded your plant material situation to potential disaster level. Wilted flowers, dead buds, lack of fruit crop, dead grass, and loss of tender new leaves are just a few of the possible outcomes from the recent weather. Is there an upside? Of course – except in a few cases - the damage does not generally result in a permanent loss.

Green turf is such a treat, especially early in the growing season before mowing becomes a troublesome chore. But when the turf emerges before danger of frost has passed, it is easy to cause permanent damage if not careful. Fortunately, grass blades (leaves) are not as affected by wind damage as other plant materials and the blades do have the ability to shrug off frost, ice, and snow without any noticeable damage - if contact remains static between cell structure and the cold. To keep that contact static, eliminate all interaction with grass blades on those mornings with heavy frost, ice or snow. As soon as contact is forced between the cold and plant tissue, damage will occur. The seriousness of that damage will depend on the level of cold contact, the health of the grass, and the contact pressure. What does that translate into? Step on or drive across the grass in the early morning when there is a minor frost covering and you will see a bit of death within a couple of days. If the covering was snow, often you will see a higher level of long term damage as that dynamic cold contact will remain intact for a longer period of time. If an ice covering, any contact will likely cause the blade to snap off. With any of this cold damage – long term turf survival is not generally an issue, as most of our lawns are tough blends of bluegrass, fescue and rye. On newly seeded areas, or areas of extreme damage - replanting may be necessary.

Any tree or shrub presenting leaf tissue or blossoms early in the season has the potential for damage from cold

weather, wind, and human intervention. At the time of emergence, the tissue is at a very vulnerable and tender phase of growth. Temperatures down to about 29 degrees F will slow but not necessarily kill the buds, even when partially open. With each degree lower, the potential for damage definitely increases. When humans throw coverings, like heavy blankets, over the tops of trees and shrubs – that weight, in addition to the frost, snow, or ice, can actually cause more damage than just leaving them alone. Again - static contact can often be shrugged off by the plant. Yes, the plants may lose leaves or flowers (and the subsequent fruit) for the current season but over the long haul, they will do okay. In comparison - unsupported coverings provide more points of dynamic contact, effectively causing more extensive leaf and flower loss as well as major limb breakage. A positive is that when early damage occurs, trees and shrubs will often re-leaf and perform just fine for the rest of the season. In cases of re-leafing, it is a good idea to take some extra time throughout the growing season to allow for more plant health care.

When cold weather hits in early spring, those early rising bulbs and plants often have no problem handling low temperatures and some wind. But prolonged temps of 10 to 20 degrees F and gale force winds present an uncommon level of challenge that cause more than just temporary plant fatigue. Critical to survival are adequate plant and soil moisture, strong stems, and good overall plant health. What has been seen this year will not get better for those bulbs that gave a good, early showing. As soon as the stems bend, water and nutrient flow has been interrupted to the point of delivering a slow death. The cold, hard winds zapped the moisture reserves out the plants, leaving them weak. Permanent damage is not likely. Yes – the early bulb show this year will be a bit pathetic. Don't be hasty in removal. Allow the foliage to remain until it browns and dies back as this will provide the necessary food for bloom set and next year's flower production. Those bulbs stems that only arch (not completely bent) can be cut off and brought indoors to enjoy. It is advisable to wait until mid-morning - or when stems are not frozen solid - to cut them. When handling, touch the stems and flowers as little as possible to minimize damage from human contact on those cold damaged plants. Place cut stems into cool water and allow them to slowly acclimate to room temperatures.

For all of you procrastinators out there (me included) – yes – it did have its rewards this year but don't even think smug thoughts - the days of catching up will come soon enough.