DIGGIN' IT

BY PHAIDRA YUNKER

Green acres?

After two weeks of temperatures hovering in the 30s (the kind of stretch that makes people start to wonder whether winter is loosening its grip) we've dropped straight back into subzero weather. This kind of backandforth isn't unusual for February, but the timing and intensity of these swings have raised questions from gardeners who are watching their trees closely: "Is this warm spell going to make my trees bud out early? And if so, should I be worried now that it's freezing again?"

Most of the time, the answer is no. But because we're still early in the season, and because the weather patterns we're seeing lately don't always match what many longtime residents remember, it's worth taking a closer look at what's happening and what it means for your trees.

Trees in Zone 4 don't break dormancy just because temperatures rise above freezing for a few days. They wait for three cues: longer day length, sufficient accumulated cold and sufficient accumulated warmth. Increasing daylight signals that winter is easing, but buds won't respond until the tree has met its "chilling requirement," the cold period that resets its internal clock. Only after that do they begin counting warm days, known as growing degree days. Until these conditions are met, buds remain tightly closed.

This is why a brief warm spell in February rarely causes serious bud development. The days are still short, the sun angle is low and the soil remains cold. Even if buds appear slightly swollen, that doesn't mean they're preparing to open. Bud swell is simply the first stage of readiness, not a sign that the tree is about to leaf out. Most native and hardy species require a long, consistent stretch of warmth before they commit to opening. A couple of weeks in the 30s is not enough to override their natural caution.

That said, some species are more responsive to temperature changes. Fruit trees, ornamentals and certain shrubs can begin to move through early stages of bud development once their chilling requirement is met. If you noticed your apple or plum buds looking a little fuller during the warm spell, you weren't imagining it. But swollen buds are still quite cold-tolerant. It's the later stages (green tips, blossom emergence and leaf-out) that are vulnerable to freezing temperatures.

This is where timing matters. We're only at the end of February. March and April can bring warm stretches, but they can (will) bring hard freezes. If a fruit tree begins to push out blossoms too early and those blossoms are then exposed to a freeze, the damage can be significant. Blossoms are far more sensitive than dormant buds. A hard freeze can kill them outright, and without blossoms, there is no fruit. Even if some blossoms survive, early bloom often means pollinators are not yet active. Bees and other pollinating insects need consistent warmth to emerge, and if they aren't present when blossoms open, fruit set will be poor.

This doesn't mean your apple tree is doomed. The tree itself will be fine. Trees are resilient, and losing a year of fruit is not a threat to their long-term health. But for gardeners who look forward to homegrown apples or plums, it's something to keep in mind as we move into the unpredictable weeks ahead.

So what should you watch for? Bud swell is normal and not a cause for concern. If you begin to see a green tip (the first sliver of green tissue emerging from the bud), that's a sign the tree is entering a more vulnerable stage. The first blossoms are even more sensitive. If a freeze hits during these stages, blossoms may turn brown, wilt or drop. On fruit trees, this usually means reduced or absent fruit for the season. On ornamental trees, it simply means a lighter bloom display.

If we do get a warm stretch in March followed by a hard freeze, you may see signs of frost damage on new growth. Blackened tips, wilted leaves or browned blossoms are common. Resist the urge to prune immediately. Trees often push out secondary buds once temperatures stabilize, and premature pruning can remove viable growth.

As for what you can do, the options are limited but not nonexistent. Maintaining a good layer of mulch around your trees helps regulate soil temperature and slows premature warming (seriously, folks, mulch your trees) and avoid pruning during warm spells, since pruning stimulates growth.

Although trees in Zone 4 have always dealt with unpredictable springs, many gardeners have noticed that the timing and intensity of weather swings in recent years don't always match what they remember from decades past. The USDA's recent update to the hardiness zone map reflects changes in average temperatures, and with those shifts comes a greater chance of early warm spells followed by sharp cold snaps. These swings can push certain species (especially fruit trees) into more vulnerable stages earlier than they should be.

As we move into March and April, it's worth paying closer attention to bud development, not because the trees are fragile, but because the timing of freezes, thaws and bloom periods doesn't always line up the way it used to. Keeping an eye on buds, knowing the stages of development, and recognizing when blossoms are at risk can help gardeners better understand what's happening and what to expect in the season ahead.

Have plant questions? I've got answers. Email your questions or photos to digginit@nordaknorth.com, or stop by The Leader-News office with a photo or sample.

Phaidra Yunker is a Master Gardener and a certified horticulturist with over a decade of experience in the horticultural industry. She serves as Vice President of the City of Washburn Forestry Board.

BACK IN THE DAY

Underwood

COMPILED BY SHELLY WALLACE

from the Files of the Central McLean News Journal

20 years ago, March 2006

Underwood's City Commission set the wheels in motion for paving the Repnow-Mees Additions, which would include from 19-31 lots on paved streets.

Underwood's first annual job fair held on Saturday, March 4, was a success, and organizers are already planning next year's event. Underwood Economic Development Director Brian Ash said there was good representation from employers in the area, as well as those looking for employment.

Underwood Civic Club members will be serving up Indian tacos and knoephla soup before the dance performance at the Underwood School Cafeteria on Saturday from 5 to 7 p.m.

Committee chairman Pastor Dean Hartley said that proceeds from the dinner will be matched up to $200 by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans and will be used to help purchase banners for the light poles in Underwood.

The Underwood Comette Dance Team will hold their final home performance of the year on Saturday night. The dance team has had a successful competitive year and wants to show off the routines that they have perfected throughout the year.

One year from the church's new beginning, the Faith Evangelical Free Church of Underwood has been accepted as a member of the Evangelical Free Church of America's Northern Plains District.

One year ago, the First Baptist Church and Alexander Presbyterian Churches of Underwood dissolved their non-profit corporations and formed one new corporation with the combined members.

Hunter Gordon was named to the president's roll of honor at UND for the fall 2005 semester. William Hultberg, Ryan Kerzman, Justin Hughes and Hunter Gordon were named to the dean's list at UND for the fall 2005 semester.

The residents of McLean County will decide the future of a new jail facility. A committee decided to have the commission present a 24-bed option to the voters and bid the job with an option to do 30 beds, according to budget., which they wanted to keep at $3.5 million.

30 years ago, March. 1996

Local dart enthusiasts Paul Ash and Mike Ell teamed up to take first place in open cricket at the state dart tournament in Mandan. Ash also teamed with Larry Brazell to place third in open 301.

Jean Helseth and Deb Hatzenbuhler took second in women's cricket, and Jim Hatzenbuhler was second in open cricket.

Underwood elementary students visited a mammoth plastic whale filled with air that resided at city hall all last week.

Shawn Dzuik, an Underwood senior, was one of the exhibitors at the entrepreneurial fair with his new business, Cutting Edge Installations. He installs stereos, brass boxes for car trunks and custom speakers for his customers.

40 years ago, March 1986

Students from McLean County schools will be matching wits in a first-time academic Olympics. Representing Underwood will be seniors Troy Thinnes, Becky Brockel, Michelle Hummel, Marnie Gazdik, and junior, Becki Zietz. Alternates are juniors, Denise Rasmusson and Kim Landenberger. Coach is Delores Sorenson.

A countywide economic development committee is to be organized. Action was spurred by the state legislature's enactment of the Job Development Authority Act. The provisions allow for a county committee and a one-mill levy designed to attract jobs. No levy is to be imposed at this time.

Four junior girls from Underwood will be attending the 1986 session of North Dakota Girls State. Attending will be Mary Bachmeier, Denise Rasmusson, Brenda Folden and Becki Anderson.

It was a full day of music climaxed by an impressive evening concert featuring the 73 member band and 80 member choir made up of musicians from all eight county school music programs. The McLean County Band and Choir Honor Concert was held at the Washburn High School Gym and conducted by Jeffrey Brewer, the director of choral activities at Mary College, Bismarck.

50 years ago, March 1976

Construction work on the new elementary school building in Underwood has started up again. Crews from Sherman Masonry have been working intermittently the last few weeks laying brick.

The Underwood ballot will be full for this year's election. City Auditor Q.O. Sayler has received five petitions from individuals interested in having their names appear on the spring ballot. Jay Snyder is the fifth person to file with the auditor. Snyder will run against incumbents Duane Schuh and Lester Zietz. Also challenging are Charles Tauer and Don Schell. Max Guenthner is running unopposed for president of the commission.

Underwood handily downed their opponent 70-54 in the first round of regional play Monday night. They easily downed an evenly matched team from Sherwood.

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