

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTO BY William M. Johnson

Honey bees become active during warm days of winter along the Gulf Coast. They gather nectar and pollen from a variety of flowers in home landscapes including flowers produced by peaches and other fruit trees.

I've been an Extension horticulture agent for almost 25 years and times have changed over that time period. As I'm writing this column, I had planned on providing a countdown to when the spring season would officially commence. Spring begins with the vernal equinox on March 20 at 11:57 a.m.

I was going to count the days remaining until the start of spring the old-fashioned way—by checking a calendar. Then it occurred

to me that there is likely an app for that and not surprisingly there are several on the Internet. The darn thing gives the countdown in days, hours, minutes and seconds. Impressive but TMI (too much information)! Suffice it to say that spring will start about 29 days after this column is published. Given the rather unusual weather we have experienced thus far, it's not likely that prior to 11:57 a.m. on March 20, weather con-

ditions will be cold and damp and thereafter the day will become an idyllic spring day.

After all, this is Texas—if you don't like the weather now just wait a bit. Yes, spring will come even though winter seems reluctant to let go of its grip. My usual first indicator that spring will be arriving is when the leaf buds of Arizona ash trees start to swell. This usually occurs around mid- to late-February but not so this



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year due to the cool weather. Honey bees are not active during cold weather so I was pleasantly surprised to observe them working what few flowers there are in my home landscape. The half-dozen honey bees working the blossoms on my Tropic Snow peach tree over the weekend will have to serve as this year's harbinger of spring.

Gardeners asked questions about cold weather and gardening issues. A sampling of the questions is as follows:

Question: If the weather warms up for a few days in February, my St. Augustine lawn may put out a little growth. Should I go ahead and fertilize my lawn now using a slow release fertilizer?

Answer: Most area St. Augustine lawns are dull brown in color because of the spells of cold weather over the last few weeks. While St. Augustine lawns still remain brown, it only requires a few days of relatively warm weather to stimulate growth. Gardeners are likely to have cabin fever and be tempted to begin certain projects now such as fertilizing the lawn. However, I would not fertilize lawns just yet. St. Augustine lawns will make poor utilization of the nitrogen at this time of the year. Postpone this project until mid-March or even early April when the grass can make better use of this fertilizer.

Question: I have been told that a cold winter will reduce the number of insect pests for the following summer. Will this winter's cold temperatures make a major dent in the occurrence of some of our more annoying insects?

Answer: This is a very tough question to answer. The answer is not a

simple yes or no. Insects are a very resilient form of animal life. They have developed survival strategies that strongly favor their return each spring.

One such method is a natural anti-freeze they produce by reducing the amount of water in their blood. They can also tolerate ice crystals in their body. Insects will spend winter in different life forms such as an egg, larvae, or pupae. These life forms can tolerate cold temperatures very well especially if they are in a protected area such as underground or in leaf litter.

Some insects such as mosquitoes reproduce so rapidly it would be difficult to tell if a cold winter had any effect on them at all. A cold winter can act as double-edged sword in that it can have an effect on both harmful and beneficial insects. While a colder-than-normal winter may reduce the overwintering population of some insects, it's not at all likely to have a major impact on most insect pest problems. In fact, the majority of our more common insect pests (such as aphids, scale, webworms, etc.) occur in other states where winters are notoriously cold.

In other words, most of our insect pests have probably faired quite well over our winter and are as anxious about spring's arrival as we are.

Question: I have never cut back my liriopie. I have been told you are supposed to do it every year. Is this really something that must be done and if so when?

Answer: Liriopie is a very tough plant. As you know you can do nothing to liriopie and it will continue to grow and flower. The purpose

of the annual removal of all leaves is to rid the plant of unsightly and damaged leaves. Old leaves can create an unsightly contrast with the new leaves as they emerge from the ground in the spring.

Try mowing or clipping off all the leaves to within one inch from the ground before new growth begins to emerge. This should be done in late January in most years as most liriopie start putting out new leaves by then. The liriopie growing in my home landscape has not sent up any new growth due to cold temperatures but the current spell of warm temperatures will likely stimulate plants to start putting out new growth soon. Many other ornamental grasses, such as miscanthus and pampas grass, can be pruned back but leave about 7-8 inches of brown stubble to reduce chances of clumps rotting in the event spring weather conditions are unusually wet.

