

*Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office*



PHOTO BY Camille Goodwin

Some residents have reported that their Christmas trees are producing new growth. Once dormant Christmas trees are placed in a warm, favorable environment, they can and sometimes do begin to grow like it is springtime.



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Dr. William Johnson is a horticulturist with the Galveston County Office of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Visit his website at <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/galveston>.

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**Q: Why is my Christmas tree beginning to grow? Do dead Christmas trees grow shoots?**

A: I've been a County Extension Horticulturist for 26 years and this is the first year I have received such an inquiry. I've since receive additional inquiries regarding Christmas trees producing new growth. It may seem like a miracle when your Christmas tree breaks bud and begins to grow while on display in the home.

To understand what is going on, we need to talk about

how conifers (yes, your Christmas tree is just a large conifer) develop and survive the winter. Each year, Christmas trees enter a period of dormancy in the fall. This process helps them survive through winter until spring when they will come out of dormancy and resume growth.

The two most critical environmental factors that trigger the dormancy process are shorter day lengths and lowering temperatures. This dormancy, or chilling period, is needed before normal growth

will resume in the spring.

As a general rule, most conifers need to accumulate at least six to 10 weeks of exposure to temperatures below 40 degrees Fahrenheit in order to meet their chilling requirement to overcome dormancy when spring arrives. The chilling requirement is an evolutionary adaptation that protects trees from starting to grow anytime they experience a brief warm up during the winter.

Some tree species require a relatively short chilling



period to overcome dormancy. If we have a cold fall and early winter, trees may accumulate enough chilling hours to satisfy their dormancy requirement before they are harvested from the field or during shipping and display at the tree lot. Once the chilling hours are met, the only thing keeping the tree from growing is continued exposure to cool temperatures. Once trees are placed in a warm, favorable environment they can and sometimes do begin to grow like it is spring-time. This can seem like a miracle, but it is just the miracle of nature.

**Q: My two-year-old peach tree produced a full flush of flowers over the Thanksgiving Holiday. The peaches had grown to one-half inch in diameter by the Christmas Holiday. What went wrong with my peach tree?**

A: Peaches on a tree during the Christmas Holiday might be seen as being another miracle. The answer is that the peach tree was "confused" as to what time of the year it was. Plants do not have the benefit of checking a 12-month calendar as humans do, seeing that the winter season is just getting underway, and realize that now is not a good time to be blooming. Plants must rely on other indicators (including their internal clocks) to tell them what season it is and what they should be doing (or not doing). This normally works exceedingly well in most seasons and under most conditions.

Generally, plants that flower out-of-season are under some type of stress. Extended periods of drought during the summer followed by ample rains (especially if accompanied by cooler temperatures) is the

most common source of stress in our growing area.

This chain of events was enough to confuse some plants into "thinking" it was spring and thus it must be time to bloom. I recommend removing the peaches that have set.

Another related question I received is "Will these plants bloom again next spring?" Peach trees typically produce an overabundance of flowers during the spring blooming period. At the very least, your peach tree should flower again in the spring and may produce a normal crop load if provided good care (proper fertilization and irrigation).

**Q: My neighborhood was overwhelmed with mounds of a white, sticky material falling from the sky. I need help with identifying what the material is and what produced it. I am not crazy!**

A: I receive a variety of novel inquiries but this one garnered my interest as I knew it would not be an ordinary or routine matter to resolve. The caller resides in Dickinson, TX, and had first contacted personnel at Galveston County's Office of Environmental Health Services who in turn contacted me.

The resident submitted samples of the material that had landed onto tree limbs in her home landscape as well as electrical lines and pole transformers near her home. She stated that her neighbors were also very concerned about the matter as this occurrence involved several other homes and neighbors. She was understandably concerned but wanted me to know that she was not crazy (her words).

I contacted Dr. Mike Merchant, a Professor of Entomology and Extension Urban Entomologist with

Texas A&M. He identified the mystery material as globs of webbing amassed from individual strands of spider webs.

Spider experts (known as arachnologists) describe this phenomenon as ballooning silk.

While certainly an uncommon event, it's not unprecedented. Similar events were reported earlier this year in the Ft. Worth, TX, area by a local television station. Long story made short, the webbing was produced by spiders as an aerial dispersal technique called ballooning.

Ballooning involves baby spiders climbing to the top of a structure (such as a fence post or leaf blade), raising their abdomens upward and then releasing strands of silk for the wind to float them to new locations. While ballooning can occur on a very limited scale at any given time, mass ballooning involving thousands and even millions of spiders, like the reported event, is rare.

The homeowner was not "crazy," just observant and concerned. I thought it to be a moment of happenstance when a single spider, floating (ballooning) on a thin line of webbing, landed on the windshield of my car as I was leaving the office the day before Christmas Eve, perhaps this too was a miracle of sorts after all.

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