

Will this weather damage plants?

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Happy New Year and now that the holidays are over, it's time for spring, right? I struggle through January and February and can't stand being cooped up indoors.

The first halfway decent day will find me outside checking out my hellebores and snowdrops to see what might be coming up.

Of course there are loads of seed catalogues to keep me occupied and dreaming of spring but they just make it worse.

Many are wondering what this recent cold spell might do to plants in the landscape and garden.

There are many ways that cold weather affects plants. Extreme cold temperature is just one of them. I don't expect too much damage from this current cold spell unless we get down in the negative 30F area.

If we had above-average temperatures a few days prior to this cold snap, it would be a different story and we might see a lot of plant damage.

Fortunately we had fairly cold temperatures prior to this period of low temperature. Plants were dormant and are able to withstand the temperatures we are experiencing now.

In 1994 and again in 2014 winter temperatures dropped into the negative 30F range and we saw damage to boxwood, English ivy, weeping cherries, roses and a few other plants.

You may see some winter leaf burn on broadleaf evergreens such as boxwood or holly but this is common almost any winter.

Broadleaved evergreens store their energy in the leaf and thus are susceptible to water loss through the leaf surface.

Winter leaf burn occurs when the ground is frozen and the wind blows across the leaf's surface. Water is lost at a faster rate than can be taken in, resulting in browning of the leaf.

These leaves usually fall off come spring and summer and are replaced by new leaves.

Flower buds are generally more susceptible to cold injury than leaf buds. For instance, forsythia flower buds are killed when temperatures are around -15F. We may see some damage to these flowers come spring.

However, since we have snow cover (a great insulator for plants), we may see flowers at the snow level and not any higher. This happens periodically.

If you pruned any of your plants just prior to this cold spell, you may end up with some branch dieback. Pruning exposes tissue and makes it more susceptible to cold damage.

I doubt that many of you were out pruning the week before Christmas so this may not be an issue!

The bottom line is that cold affects plants in many ways and that plants are very resilient. We just have to take a wait and see position and hope that spring gets here sooner rather than later!



Winter leaf burn on boxwood