

Last week I addressed concern for shrubbery which had been severely bent to the ground from the weight of the infamous Groundhog Day heavy snowfall. Now, two and one-half weeks later, a good share of that snow has melted, and fortunately, most crushed shrubberies have returned to their upright positions with little damage.



Although a large amount of that heavy snow has melted, as of writing this piece plenty remains covering the ground. Of late, some gardeners are now concerned about their perennials and the affect this prolonged snow cover has had on them.

Such snow cover is actually good fortune. Interestingly, a more severe problem occurs when the snow cover is minimal or non-existent, particularly when temperatures

outdoors fall to subzero. When subzero blasts of air occur, they most frequently transpire at surface level, and when snow cover is lacking, any vegetation at or above the soil line will receive the full brunt of these icy winds. When this situation occurs, the moisture in the upper layers of the soil will freeze causing the soil to heave and exposing the crowns of perennials. Unfortunately, exposed crowns, tubers and any roots are far more likely to suffer damage.

Although we humans are probably growing tired of snow cover, I have a hunch if perennial plants could talk, right now they'd be saying, "We are loving it!" When extremely cold temperatures occur, a good amount of snow on the ground is a good thing. The snow cover acts as an insulation. A foot or more of snow will prevent the surface soil from dipping into the subzero temperatures even though the air temperatures are well below zero. Additionally, the snow prevents the wind from dehydrating the soil surface and any exposed vegetation.

It's a fact; extremely low temperatures greatly affect the ability of a plant to survive the winter. One might recall that last year on 5-23-2015, I wrote about an extreme cold phenomenon called the Polar Vortex. Most of Central United States, including all of Nebraska, experienced these subzero Arctic cold temperatures. The vortex occurred once during the first week of November, 2014, and then again in early February, 2015. When these bone-chilling blasts transpired, unfortunately, no snow cover existed here in the Kearney area. As a result, a number of exposed perennials, including herbaceous and woody stemmed plants, suffered severe damage and/or death. In that article I attributed their deaths to a term we call, Winter Kill. The timing of when the temperatures plunge, how far they plunge and how long the freezing temperatures remain greatly influences the consequences. Furthermore, if and when these plunging temperatures occur, a heavy snow cover greatly determines the outcome for herbaceous and woody stemmed plants.

With nine days still remaining in the month of February and all of March yet to come, we could experience another Polar Vortex. Interestingly, the forecast for this week is temperatures in the 50's. I have a hunch that by the time you read this article most perennials will no longer be covered with snow. Fret not. I'm sure another big snow is just around the corner. Your perennials will love it —but perhaps not you.