

Yard and Garden – 02-07-2015 – Ted Griess/Extension Horticulture Assistant

*For as the sun shines on Candlemas Day
So far will the snow swirl until the May.*

Author unknown— of German origin

Some traditions are quite bizarre, and I've discovered their origins can be just as weird. The verse listed above portrays a tradition observed by early European Christians. It generally was celebrated about this time of year. The event was Candlemas Day. On such a day, it was a custom to have the clergy bless candles and distribute them to the people. It was a day marked as a milestone in the winter calendar.

Those German settlers who came to the United States in the early 1800's and settled in Pennsylvania are credited with carrying the Candlemas tradition to this country. Once here, they significantly modified it. On Monday of this past week, America observed that tradition. We've come to know it as Groundhog Day.

Such a strange tradition began on February 2, 1887. On that day, the residents of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, (an unusual name for a town if you ask me) made their first trek to Gobbler's Knob (another peculiar name) to awaken that infamous groundhog known as Punxsutawney Phil. Supposedly, back then, the groundhog was selected because those early Germans thought the groundhog was a wise animal—sensible enough to carry on the legend of Candlemas Day.

Since that day, on every February 2nd, Punxsutawney Phil forecasts the weather. As most of us know, legend dictates that if Phil sees his shadow, six more weeks of winter weather will continue; otherwise, if there is no shadow, we can anticipate an early spring. For those of you who missed Phil's prophetic discovery this past Monday, the sun was out and Phil saw his shadow. I guess, according to this furry, visionary creature's prediction that means six more weeks of winter weather.

Let's face it; the month of February is probably the worst month for gardeners. The good news is it's the shortest month. Whether you place any credence in Phil's prognostication or not, everyone knows that according to the calendar, there are actually six more weeks of winter until spring officially arrives. Whether the weather is winter-like or spring-like for the next six weeks is anyone's guess. The question might be, "What's a gardener to do?"

If you really feel you must be gardening, consider the following things to accomplish this month.

- February is the perfect time to prune deciduous trees and shrubs. They are fully dormant and void of leaves resulting in an unobstructed view of the entire shape and form of the tree or shrub. Caution, wait to prune spring flowering shrubs and trees until after they have bloomed.
- Check flower beds for plants that may have heaved. We've had a number of unseasonably warm days in January followed by freezing cold —perfect conditions to create heaving soil. Firm back the soil and add more mulch to stabilize somewhat the temperature of the soil.

- Now would be an opportune time to cut branches from flowering shrubs for forcing indoors.
- Since the better share of January was extremely dry and void of moisture, consider watering shrubs and trees on days when temperatures are above freezing. Pay special attention to those plants that were new to the landscape last season. You might also consider watering your lawn. Be sure to disconnect hoses from hydrants during freezing temperatures.
- Plan and purchase seeds while they are readily available.
- Consider starting seeds of flowers and veggies indoors, particularly those that have a long growing season.

Hopefully these tasks will get you through the next six weeks. Oh, and by the way, I urge you to prepare for our next unusual tradition. After next Saturday, if you haven't given your sweetheart a meaningful gift for Valentine's Day, I can predict, it will be a long and cold six more weeks of winter for you. Even Punxsutawney Phil would agree with me on that one.