

It is apparent that gardeners are getting excited. My phone is once again ringing repeatedly. Although I did receive some calls during the winter months, they were rare and understandably so. When snow abounds for days on end and outdoor temperatures remain in the teens or lower, gardening is not a high priority with most people. Now that spring has finally arrived, I am starting to receive more activity. As the days become warmer, people are stopping in, calling or emailing.

Try to remember that in 2017 Central Nebraska experienced a dry, warm autumn. Throughout most of the fall, temperatures hovered in the 50s — sometimes even warmer. Finally, in mid-December, temperatures became more autumn-like. By Christmas Day, extremely cold temperatures moved in reaching single and below-zero digits. There they remained for nearly two weeks. I viewed such a weather phenomenon as a red flag. There now seems to be a strong interest from gardeners as to what we can expect this spring.

In the above-described scenario, trees, shrubs and other plant life were exposed to sudden, freezing temperatures. The cold was relentless and spanned a strong two weeks. As a result, one wonders if plants had time to acclimate and become fully winterized. I am guessing the sudden and prolonged cold caught a few select trees, shrubs and perennials unprepared. Some had not reached full dormancy when these frigid temperatures set in.

One might recall that on May 23, 2015, I wrote about a phenomenon in nature called a polar vortex. For weeks prior to that date, I had been inundated with calls from homeowners complaining about trees and shrubs not leafing out. Many were upset and deeply concerned to notice bark popping free from the trunks and branches.

Unfortunately, when bark buckles and separates from the tree, it is usually an indication of freeze damage. The living tissue beneath the bark freezes, causing expansion. This forces the bark to break free. When this happens, damage occurs to the conductive vascular tissue of the tree.

Such a problem may have again happened this year. Note, I use the word “may.” For the next few weeks, simply remain vigilant. Wait to see if damage

transpired. If one does notice bark lifting, do not pull it off, even if it appears loose. Trees and shrubs have the ability to seal, not heal. The wound created from bark popping loose may seal by forming callus tissue over the wound. Be patient. It normally takes several growing seasons for this to happen. Also, if this damage exists, avoid applying paint, tar or other like products to the damaged area. Unfortunately, when damage is severe, those areas affected will likely die and will require requiring selective pruning later in the growing season. One may also experience dead trees.

In the spring, weather conditions of this type may cause perennials to break dormancy later than usual. I encourage gardeners to wait at least until mid-June before declaring any plant dead. Nothing is more heartbreaking than to dig up a perennial assumed dead only to see signs of green emerging from the crown or rootstock. Keep in mind some plants such as hardy hibiscus are always notoriously late to emerge.

For now, I can appreciate all the excitement, but I stress patience. It is too early to assess any degree of damage. Let's face it; our weather in Nebraska can be intense and sometimes harmful to plant life. Eventually, if one finds oneself needing to replace any plants, whether they are trees, shrubs, or perennials, make sure replacements are rated hardy to USDA Zones 5.