

Can Critters or Plants Predict the Weather?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Every year I am asked numerous times whether this critter or that plant can predict the weather. Everybody has heard about the Woolly Bear caterpillar's weather predicting ability, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. White frost flowers start to bloom six weeks before the first frost, according to legend. Large hay crops as well as large nut (acorn or walnut crops) are said to indicate a hard winter approaching. Squirrels that seem extra busy caching nuts is another indicator, according to legend, of a harsh winter. Thick skins on onions or extra heavy husks on corn are also supposed to indicate a cold winter approaching as does a lot of mice trying to get into your house. So how about it? Do critters or plants have the ability to predict the weather?

Well, no matter what I say, the believers will say yes and the nay-sayers will say no! Do I believe that critters and plants can predict the weather? No. Is the action of critters or heavy nut crops, etc. in response to the weather? Absolutely! But let's not get the cart before the horse. Everything in nature is cause and effect, but let's get the right cause with the right effect!

How a plant grows, and subsequently what it is doing this year, this fall or even right now, is a factor of the weather that we have had all year as well as last year and the years before that. If an oak tree has a lot of acorns, it means that the tree had a good growing season. There were no late frosts to kill the blossoms, it was good weather for pollinating and then good temperatures and precipitation to make sure that the small acorns continued to develop to maturity. That's all it means!

Let's also realize that daily, monthly and annual weather can follow in patterns. Patterns may last for weeks, months or years. A year with a mild winter can be followed by a year with a cold and snowy winter. A mild winter could mean good acorn production conditions. So that mild winter created a situation that allowed a good acorn crop. People will always remember when the folk lore comes true, but rarely do they remember when it was a bust! You could have two mild winters in a row. Or you could have a bad summer with no acorn production and a severe winter that follows.

You also have to keep in mind that a bit of forecasting folklore may have been fairly accurate in New England, but just doesn't work here in Kansas! The folklore migrated with the settlers, but the weather patterns did not.

What about the Woolly Bear caterpillars. Does the width of the brown section have any predictive ability for the upcoming winter weather? Legend has it that the wider the brown middle section, the milder the winter. In reality, it appears that the width of the brown band, or rather the number of brown hairs is directly related to how early the caterpillar hatched out of it's egg. A late spring hatch will result in caterpillars with a different number of brown hairs than an early spring hatch. It's weather related alright, but weather that has already been. As for squirrels busy caching nuts, they'll only cache them if there are acorns. Again, a function of what has been, not what's going to be!

Weather folklore is fun. White frost flower does in fact bloom about 6 weeks before our first freeze, assuming our freeze occurs at about the standard time. Seem people swear by these legends, others scoff at them. As for me, they are fun to observe, but when you get right down to it, I don't even trust the weatherman, so I'm not about to trust a caterpillar!