

Why Snow Is Good

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

There's been a lot of cussing and gnashing of teeth in recent days because of that cool white stuff that is everywhere right now known as snow! I will be the first to admit that snow is a nuisance. Sure, if I didn't have to go to work or go to the store or get outside to do anything, it probably wouldn't be quite so troublesome. But there is work to go to, groceries to buy, meetings to attend and so there we have the conflict! But if we can get by the inconvenience of it all, snow provides us many very valuable benefits that we all too often overlook.

Most obvious is the moisture. Okay, many of us would rather have an inch of rain in March than a foot of snow in February or January or any month of the year. We often talk about a foot of snow equaling an inch of rain, but that is an average. It may only take eight inches of a really wet snow for that inch of moisture or it may take twenty inches of a real dry snow. The snow this week started out fairly normal but as the event progressed, the snow became dryer. That ten inches of snow resulted in just under three fourths of an inch of rain.

But here's the neat part about snow moisture. Barring extremely heavy snows, rapid melt and frozen ground, more of the precipitation goes into the soil. Snow melts relatively slowly compared to a typical thunderstorm dropping the same amount of rain in an hour or two. Snow melt will often take days or weeks. The moisture soaks in very slowly. It may make the soil very muddy, even supersaturated, but that's okay because it soaks on down and doesn't run off.

At one time there was a commonly held belief that wheat did so well after a snowy winter because of all the nutrients that the snow contained. At one time it was believed that a good snow fall held twenty or thirty pounds of nitrogen per acre. Well, it is true that there are plant nutrients in snowfall, but in reality it's ounces per acre, not pounds. The good growth of wheat following a snowy winter was in part due to the slow release moisture but also because of the great insulation that snow provides.

The other night, when the temperature dropped below zero, the soil, under all that snow, was comfortably right around freezing at the critical two inch soil depth. Even just two or three inches of snow creates a great amount of insulation: insulation from cold temperatures and insulation from the drying and desiccating winds that we saw recently.

Here's the other great misunderstood part of snow's insulating effect. Not only doesn't it insulate against unseasonably cold temperatures, but it also insulates or buffers from rapid warm ups. We are challenged in growing fruit crops locally because of the extreme weather variability. All too often fruit trees bud out too soon and then those flower buds get frozen. To keep this from happening we need to reverse our thinking. Stop planting those trees on the south side of the house, where we think they are out of the cold wind, but in reality in the place that's going to warm up first. We need to plant on the north side of the house where the snow melts last in the spring. The snow keeps the ground cold and the cold ground slows down the process of trees breaking dormancy. The bud development will be delayed and the trees will be less likely to get their flower buds frosted off!

Yes, it was very inconvenient to have all that snow mess up our travel. But it's bringing us so many good things. And if we can just get past the inconvenience, and even the benefits, we can stop and enjoy the incredible beauty that snow brings to our landscape. Incredible beauty and very transient beauty. A beautiful natural sculpture that we better enjoy now, because in a day or two, it'll be gone.