

A Few Nice Days Doth Not a Spring Make

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Yes, the temperature the first three months of 2017 was well above normal. Many plants throughout the area are running anywhere from seven to fifteen days ahead of long term averages. April may end up average or even above average in temperature, but that doesn't mean we can jump the gun on planting cold sensitive plants in our vegetable or flower gardens.

Since 1951, our average last freeze of the spring has been on April 15th. Two years out of three the average last freeze will be within 13 days of April 15th. The last spring freeze has been as early as March 10th (2012) and as late as May 14th (1953). A few years ago we had snow on the first Thursday of May. While we talk about the average last freeze, we also talk about the frost free date. The frost free date is that date after which we have less than a 1% likelihood of having a temperature of 32 degrees or colder. For our area, that frost free date is basically May 10th.

I have gone back and looked at years when we've had warm winters, or a warm January or a warm February and then looked to see if there was any correlation to an "early" spring or a hot summer. After looking at nearly 70 years worth of local data, I have come to the striking conclusion, that there is no correlation. While weather patterns can sometimes last for months, even years, most of the time they only last about six weeks and then we transition into a different pattern.

One of the challenges is that Kansas sits in the middle of a large continent. We are going to be influenced by whatever weather pattern or system has the most energy. It may be from the south, or the west, or the north. Once certain patterns set up, often involving a stalled high or low pressure system, this can steer weather towards us or away from us for weeks on end. We can look at ocean currents in the Atlantic and the Pacific and make predictions based on what has happened in the past. But ultimately, all it may take is a system to move 50 miles one way or another and we can have day after day of rain, or week after week of drought. There's no way to adequately predict this, when you're in the middle of a large continent!

Back to our spring growing season. Yes, air temperatures are important to plants. But soil temperatures, especially early in the growing season, are even more important. Soil temperatures lag behind air temperatures simply because there is a large mass of soil and water that needs to warm up and that warming happens slowly. As of the first of this week, average soil temperatures were still in the upper 50s. After the past few days, I'm sure that the soil has cooled a few degrees. Overnight lows in the 30's can really chill the soil back down as can daytime highs twenty degrees below average and cold rains. But the week ahead shows a slow return to more typical temperatures.

I'm writing all of this to simply tell you, that if you already planted your tomatoes, you probably jumped the gun a little bit! There's a reason I encourage people to wait until Mother's Day weekend to plant their tomatoes and you've just seen it. Tomatoes and other tender crops, do not like cold weather and they may exhibit abnormal behavior when exposed to the kind of temperatures we've seen and your water walls you placed around the tomatoes, can only do so much!

I want spring to get here and stay as bad as anyone else. But Mother Nature doesn't care! So we just bide our time, and gnash our teeth, and wait until the appropriate time to get our tomatoes and tender flowers planted!