

Early Spring?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

So some rodent in Pennsylvania was ripped out of his burrow, while he should still be in hibernation, and since the sun wasn't shining he didn't cast a shadow and I'm supposed to believe that this means it'll be an early spring? Sorry, but my faith in a weather prognosticating woodchuck isn't very great! Cute celebrations aside, poor Phil would prefer to still be in hibernation on February 2nd. But I do want to go to Gobbler's Knob someday to watch the festivities.

There are many measures of spring. Meteorologists like to stay with even calendar months so they start spring on March 1. Astronomically, spring starts when the sun passes over the equator which this year is March 19th (at 9:39 p.m.) From a plant growth or gardeners point of view I'm more concerned about when we have our last frost so like to look at average last frost dates.

If you look at each year independently you'll get a graph with points all over the board. Over the past 70 years (since 1951) the date of the last 32 degree temperature in the spring has ranged from March 10 to May 14 with an average date, over that 70 year period, of April 14th. In weather records we often work on a 30 year average to determine "normal". These averages are updated every ten years. Right now our normal temperatures are based on the average from 1981 - 2010. Starting next year that'll be updated to cover the period of 1991 - 2020.

Taking that 30 year average to a different level, what happens if we start with 1980 and look at the 30 year average last frost date. Then lets go to 1981 and look at 30 years, dropping off 1951 and adding 1981. In essence you will have a moving 30 year average for the last 40 years. If climate and weather patterns were stable you would see very little change going through the years.

When we take the Junction City data and look at each year from 1980 to today and calculate the average last frost date for the previous 30 years we see a very telling story. At the start, 1980 and 1981 our average last frost date was April 17 or 18. If we look at the most recent 30 years that average date has moved up to April 11th. In 40 years the average last frost date is a week earlier. Based on these observations, spring is coming a little earlier based on the average last frost date of spring.

The challenge with the weather in Kansas is not the averages but rather the extremes that make up the averages. Warm weather early is something we regularly see. Look at last Sunday for example. Locally we tied the record high for February 2nd. Hays had 80 degree readings. Warm spells like this coax plants to start breaking dormancy. Plants will move in and out of winter dormancy and each time they move out of winter dormancy they just can't get quite as dormant with the next cold weather. As a plant loses it's winter dormancy it starts bud swelling and moving blossoms into growth mode. If leaf buds freeze, the plant will make new ones. If flower buds freeze, that's it for this year. It's a challenge we'll continue to face.

Will we have an early spring this year? For the sake of the plants I hope not. January was warmer than normal. The one and three month climate outlooks show no measurable trend for deviation from normal at this time so it's anyone's guess. Regardless of the groundhog, regardless of the climate prediction center's forecasts, I sure wouldn't be in a hurry to get my tomatoes planted yet. Stay focused on Mother's Day weekend!