

Winter can be beneficial

By: Wayne Jewell

I hear people complaining about the extreme cold temperatures and all of the snow we have been getting. Compared to this winter, the past few years seemed mild. As I write this article, it occurs to me that February 2, is “Groundhog Day” which means that we are about half way through winter. We just have to get through the second half of winter.

A long, cold, bitter winter is a good thing. There, I said it and I will now go in to “protective custody” because I can feel the “lynch mob” forming already.

In my defense, I made this statement because it is true. The longer and colder the winter, the shorter the “growing season”. This means that there is less time for insects to do their damage to trees and shrubs.

The “threshold of insect activity” is 50 degrees. Below this temperature, insect activity for the most part, ceases as they go in to a stage of dormancy. The farther south one goes, the longer the growing season and greater the insect activity.

Take white birch trees for example. They actually don't do as well here in northern Ohio as they do on the other side of Lake Erie in Canada. The reason for this is the bronze birch borer. It is the main nemesis of birch trees because of its tunneling activity in the xylum wood just under the bark. As long as air temperatures remain above 50 degrees, this insect will continue to feed until temperatures cool down in the fall at which time it will enter a dormancy or rest period until temperatures once again rise above 50 degrees in the spring. In the spring, it goes through a maturing cycle or pupation in to a bronze colored beetle that will emerge through a D shaped hole around the last week of May to the first week in June in this area. The beetle will begin it's search for a mate and upon mating, will seek a place to insert her ovipositor beneath a bark fissure or flap of bark and lay her eggs. After a brief period, the eggs will hatch in to tiny borers that start tunneling their way in to the tree where they will spend the entire “growing season” feeding on birch wood. This tunneling activity literally cuts off

food and nutrient supply lines to various parts of the tree. At this point, even large limbs can be killed off and eventually the whole tree.

Thus, birches do much better growing farther north because there is less time for insects to do their damage.

This same principle applies to other insects as well. Yellow jackets in a single season, may have nests grow to well over 10,000 insects. However, a “normal” winter will kill most, if not all of them off. The fertilized queen will survive because she will near the end of the growing season, abandon the nest and seek out a warm enough place to survive the cold. If it gets cold enough, even she may not survive if she made a poor choice in where to wait out the winter.

Anyone who has traveled to the south may have noticed that there “seems” to be more insects and they seem to be bigger. They have milder winters and longer growing seasons. Thus the insects have a longer time to feed off of plants. Fortunately, the plants that grow in the south, have adapted to the greater insect activity.

They say that with “global warming”, the Earth’s average temperature is on the rise. This means that if this keeps up, we in the Cleveland, Ohio area, might start to see trees like the white birch unable to survive. We also could begin to see insects that were not normally native to this area begin to invade such as the Bag Worm. This little guy up until just a few years ago, was not found any farther north than the Columbus, Ohio area. Now, it is here in the Cleveland area and growing in numbers.

I said it before and I will say it again. Harsh, cold, snowy winters can be a good, by keeping things in check. Go back to Columbus Bag Worms-we don’t want you here.