

Gardening in Weird Weather (or is it climate change?)

By Dr. Bob Randall

Texas weather is vexatious. If you garden here, sooner or later the weather will break your heart by quickly killing or hurting a beautiful garden and destroying a lot of work.

There are of course many ways to blunt weather's worst, and good gardening is in many ways the artful use of these techniques. But even so, our weather can be very annoying. I get asked a lot of questions about gardening and weather. So I thought I would do my best to answer some common ones.

One of the most common these days goes something like "I was thinking I would plant tropical fruit trees like mangoes (or lychee/guava/key lime/ etc.), but with the last winter I am not so sure. I thought the area was supposed to be warmer than it used to be?"

My answer to this is that the last few decades have been warmer. In average temperatures, January is usually the coldest month of the year. In 2010, at IAH, it was not in the top ten coldest ever, and there hasn't been a top ten coldest January month since 1985. Moreover, in the last 20 years, the only December month among the ten coldest Decembers ever was in 2000. The only November in the last 20 years among the coldest ever was in 1997, and the only March to qualify was in 2001.

February 2010 however was the fifth coldest February ever, and overall the 5-month cool season had one of the coldest average temperatures ever. This was probably because the Arctic Vortex weakened forcing cold air that usually exits North America through Eastern Canada and the North Atlantic, to instead exit south into Texas. See <http://oceanworld.tamu.edu/resources/oceanography-book/oceananddrought.html>. The Arctic Oscillation had by far the most negative index level since modern data collection started in 1951, so the Arctic was warm and we were cold.

Since February is both a major growing month for cool season vegetables and a start month for many warm season vegetables, it was rough going for many of us.

As well, we had an early December freeze, and many of the citrus and other semi-tropicals were not quiescent, so they got damaged. Then around January 9, we had several days with temperatures ranging from the twenties to teens. Rice Village hit 26°, south loop 21°, 18° in College Station, and 10° in Austin. These temperatures killed or damaged badly a lot of plants.

January 3, we cut back our wonderful "Barbie Pink" guava, put a 5-ft reinforcing mesh tomato cage around it, packed the inside with gallon jugs of water, filled in the cracks with leaves all the way to the top, and wrapped it with a wind proof tarp. It just barely survived. But our lychee, longan, and star fruit appear dead despite the same treatment.

Nevertheless, if you are a semi-tropical plant, last winter was not that cold by historical standards. Hobby Airport has temperature records dating 79 years from 1931. December and January each have 31 nights, and so there are 62 records at Hobby for the lowest temperature ever recorded for that winter date. 21° on January 9 was a record low for the date at Hobby. But there were no other record lows set.

Moreover, there has only been one other record December or January low set at Hobby since 1990. It was 24° on December 19, 1996. Put another way, 60 of the 62 cold month low temperature records at Hobby were set in the 58 years from 1931 to 1989, and 2 were set in the 21 years from 1990 to 2010. We used to set nearly one record a year, and now set one every 10 years. And no day in the last 20 years has been one of the ten coldest. This winter was wimpy. Go ahead and plant your guavas!

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