

Shrubs and Trees Blooming Out of Season

By Larry Caplan, Extension Horticulture Educator, Vanderburgh County, IN

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My lovely wife and I were busy with some fall gardening chores last weekend: transplanting daylilies, spreading pre-emergent herbicide, and so forth. I stopped to stretch my back and admire the yard: the first orange and yellow leaves fluttering gently to the ground; the brilliant red fall color of our 50-year old burning bush; and the pastel pink flowers of my azalea...

...Flowers on my azaleas? In the fall?

Unfortunately, yes. And since then, I've noticed crabapples, forsythia, and even some star magnolias all blooming five months early.

It's not uncommon for spring-flowering shrubs to bloom out of season, nor is it a sign of impending doom. I mean...it's not a great thing to see, but it's not the end of gardening world, either.

Out-of-season blooming is mostly caused by weather extremes. While we did have some temperature fluctuations this fall, this is not the major reason for the unusual blooming we're seeing. It is stressful conditions during the spring and summer that set plants up for this condition.

This year was definitely on the dry side. Not a drought, certainly, but the rains we had were few and far between. We had practically no snow last winter, and much less rain this spring than usual. Very warm weather in March, followed by nearly a month-long cool-down in April before jumping straight to summer. This caused plant growth to slow down, or even stop temporarily. When cool autumn weather returned, plants were tricked into thinking that spring has arrived, and it's time to bloom.

The plants that bloom in early spring are usually the ones that are affected. Azaleas, crabapples, ornamental cherries, and other early bloomers set their flower buds in the late summer and early fall. Normally, these buds remain dormant until they receive enough cold weather to signal that winter has passed. This "chilling requirement" differs for each species of plant. Between the unseasonal growth early in the year, dry weather conditions this summer, and then fluctuating temperatures this fall, the dormancy mechanism appears to have been partially short-circuited.

The good news is that only a small percentage of blossoms on most plants have been fooled. As long as the fall weather remains cool, with no sudden late-fall warmups, few other blossoms will open. The remaining flower buds will remain dormant until spring, when they should open on schedule. For most plants, we won't notice any decrease in the flower show.

The exception might be some isolated ornamental pears. I've seen a couple that appeared to be in full bloom. I would expect few, if any, flowers from them in the spring.

As long as the weather this autumn doesn't warm back up, only to be followed by a rapid plunge in temperature, we should not see much in the way of reduced flower show this spring. No special care is needed now...just take the time to smell the roses...and whatever else is blooming...