

Clark County Climatology – Late Winter and Spring

Unlike the rapid transition from summer to winter's rainy days in Clark County, the progression from cold, dark and wet wintry weather to spring and summer is agonizingly slow. Gardeners who are eager to get out of the house after the prolonged cold and wet spell have to exercise patience – lots of patience.

January is typically our coldest snowiest month of the year – and even then, most years, January is not that cold or snowy. Most of the bitterly cold days on record have occurred in the latter part of the month. For example, Battle Ground experienced 11 degrees below zero on January 31, 1950. At the same time, Vancouver recorded -5 degrees F. Such plant-killing episodes occur only about every 30 to 50 years. We may be overdue...

After the first week of February the possibility of extremely cold weather is generally over and quite often there are several days of spring-like weather to tease the gardener into believing an early spring has arrived. Record highs for February are in the low 70's; having a few 60-degree days is not unusual. After the short days of December the days are noticeably longer by mid-month. Some camellias and cherry trees may be in bloom; pussy willows may be in evidence.

While the calendar indicates that late March is the official start of spring, the month as a whole can be wet and chilly. March of 1955 was one of the coldest on record, with low temperatures in the mid-teens throughout the county. Mornings below 32 degrees typically occur about 25 percent of the time during March, but killing frosts (28 degrees and colder) occur less frequently, especially along the Columbia River. The average last date for a killing frost ranges from early March along the Columbia River to around the first of April in the northern sections of Clark County.

April is really a transitional month for the start of spring weather in Clark County. The low cloudiness and steady dismal rains of winter slowly give way to puffy clouds with showery episodes and some sun breaks. A rare few of those puffy clouds have caused real havoc. On April 5, 1972, a tornado with estimated 150-200 mph winds destroyed a bowling alley in Vancouver, killing six people.

But frost is a far more likely threat to plants than are tornadoes. The average last frost of 32 degrees or cooler ranges from around the first of April along the Columbia, to late April or early May further north. By mid-April the average high temperature is around 60 and evaporation from the soil begins to exceed the amount of rainfall, so gardens begin to dry enough to be worked. Record high temperatures for April are almost 90 degrees!!

April showers may bring May flowers – but the likelihood of showers is still not over in May. We simply get less rain during May than we had in April, and during this month the days continue to warm and evaporation increases significantly. Consequently, some irrigation may be required on lawns and gardens.

During May the average high temperature is around 70 and lows are in the mid-40's. Only gardeners in the northern and eastern portions of the county must still be alert to the possibility of frost. During May the snow

finally disappears from Silver Star Mountain, tender plants can be set out, roses start blooming, and we readily forget the long dark wet days of winter...