

# Spring garden care



SPRING IS HERE – it's official – and we'll all be glad to see some warmer days (and nights). Plants, however, need that long cold spell to rest and prepare for the spring flush of new growth. Plants cope well with our winters regardless of how long the cold weather lasts into the spring. Ironically though, cold can become a problem now the days are noticeably longer and periodic thaws take place.

Soil that is exposed to the elements can be responsible for damaging the plants it supports. Even though the air may still be cold, the sun can warm soil to the melting point, thawing it to a depth of several centimeters. This layer stays soft and mucky as long as the sun continues to shine during the day. But when night falls and the sun disappears, temperatures drop dramatically, freezing the soft surface soil again. This freeze/thaw cycle may be great for tapping maples, but it can be deadly for the plants in your garden. Plant roots are normally protected in winter, insulated by the soil and the snow covering. But at this time of year new roots start to sprout in the warm soil near the surface, only to be killed off when the sun goes down and the ground freezes.

There's more. Soil expands when it freezes, and shrinks again as it thaws. So there is movement (frost heaving) near the surface, but the deeper soil remains frozen solid, unmoving. Any roots crossing between these two layers may be severed. Plants with root systems damaged in this way may be unable to support their above ground parts when the real growing season begins. And the severed ends of the roots are wounds that are prone to infection. Dormant plants damaged in this way will be vulnerable to disease.

The damage caused by soil thawing and freezing in late winter or early spring can be minimized by mulching bare soil. Even before the snow melts you can apply a mulch of wood chips or evergreen boughs to the snow surrounding recently planted specimens. As the snow melts mulch will be lowered into place on top of the bare soil where it will insulate and bring about a slow, manageable thaw.