Warm temps arrive; March was colder than normal

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Do we dare say that winter is dead?

You know, the punishing winter, the one whose relentless persistence has forbidden us from complaining about the summer's heat.

This first day of April, as the colors of new birth emerge, is a time to celebrate spring and the warm temperatures expected to last for the foreseeable future.

Yet, before the moment disappears like the snows of yesteryear, let's take a look back at the winter that would never end.

At first glance, the figures that tell us what we think we know about things show that the traditional winter, overall, fell about in the middle of historically cold winters in the Upstate.

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CORY TANNER Clemson Extension

However, if you somehow feel like it just had to be colder than that, think not in terms of how the months of December, January and February felt – though they were certainly cold.

Think of the months that book-ended this brutal season — November and March — and you'll see why winter seemed so ... long.

"It's just felt like a long and cold winter," said John Tomko, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Greer.

The month of November was the 25th coldest November on record, 3.6 degrees below normal.

December was warmer, about 2.9 degrees above normal.

Then came January — 6.1 degrees below normal — with successive temperatures in single-digits and the bursting pipes that kept plumbers busy.

Power bills were higher, too. Duke Energy reported breaking records for the power ever used in a day in the Upstate.

See WINTER, Page 5A

ENVILLE NEW

WINTER

Continued from Page 3A

February was normal, but still February.

While the coming of March feels as if winter should come to a close, this past month mirrored how the cold season started: 3.7 degrees below normal.

So, looking at winter as a five-month ordeal, there have only been 35 colder extended winters since 1890, Tomko said.

What has it meant for spring?

The long winter, said Clemson Extension Service horticulturist Cory Tanner, will mean a "compressed spring," one that could be more colorful.

The cold winter has been largely uninterrupted with limited warm days, Tanner said.

The temperatures are rising just in time for the flowers to bloom.

This spring, all flowers will appear to bloom at the same time - the earlier cherries along with the timely azaleas, Tanner said.

"It might give you a perception that the spring is shorter," he said, "because all these plants will bloom on a compressed time scale."

The winter has been intense, Tanner said, but its persistence has helped kill off weeds.

The extreme cold, however, has caused "foliage burn" on landscaping plants like holly tree bushes and tea olives, he said.

The blooms of hydrangeas might have been burned, Tanner said, but others should be OK after last week's cold.

The bitterness of winter has cost landscapers who operated under normal planting conditions, said Rich Regan, owner of Blue Dot Landscaping in Greenville and Spartanburg.

Established grass and plants should be fine, Regan said. It's the newly planted stuff in the fall that will suffer.

"It's now harmed things like new grass and new planting," Regan said. "We're going to have to be replacing a lot of plants this spring that we planted in the fall that should have been OK."

The Bermuda and Zoysia grasses that typically emerge later than other types will be greening later this spring, he said.

The key to a strong lawn, Regan said, will be weather staying warm for the next few weeks and not dipping.

For now, he said, the winter has rendered yards that have been meticulously maintained nothing more than "infested weed beds."

The outlook is good.

The weather service is calling for temperatures in the low 80s this week.

The weekend is expected to see temperatures fall just a bit, into the 70s, meteorologist James Oh said.

The following week, Oh said, is expected to be cooler, but temperatures are still expected to be in the 60s with no freezing nights.