

Ready For Another Tough Winter?



Source: www.TurfMagazine.com

Here are some strategies for preparing turf and ornamentals for extreme weather.



[Click image to enlarge.](#)

Photo: <http://WeatherAdvance.com>

The Farmers Almanac predicts much of the South is in for a chilly and wet winter. "No region will see prolonged spells of above-normal temperatures; only near the West and East Coasts will temperatures average close to normal," says the publication's Winter Weather Outlook. On the precipitation side, it predicts, "Over the eastern third of the country, we are expecting an active storm track with a number of storms delivering copious amounts of snow and rain." While the source of these predictions is never revealed, old-timers rank their accuracy over the years as close to 80 percent—a lot better than a coin toss. To review the full Farmers Almanac outlook, go to <http://farmersalmanac.com/weather/2014/08/24/2015-us-winter-forecast>.

Scientific forecasting

The primary source for daily scientific forecasts is the NWS National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Visit <http://www.weather.gov> and enter your state, city or zip code. It's a 24/7 resource, more up-to-date than the broadcast news and without the additional chatter.

Where To Get Your Weather Data

Many local media stations combine National Weather Service information with their own resources to produce their weather reports. Some stations offer links to their information either through streaming of their on-air segments or connections to their constantly changing forecast models, or both. Pick

the source with the strongest accuracy rate and channel the information to your computer, tablet or smartphone.

The best updates of the impact of weather conditions on lawns and landscapes come through the local extension service. Some university extension services have even developed special sections geared toward green industry professionals. In many cases, you can sign up for the periodic updates via emails, blog links, texts or tweets. When concerns develop, you can communicate directly with turfgrass or ornamental specialists by phone or email.

For much of the South, temperature and precipitation predictions are being rated with an equal chance of being above or below average. Longer-range information, such as the Winter Weather Outlook, is issued by the NWS's National Center for Environmental Prediction (NCEP) through its National Climate Data Center. These forecasts are posted monthly at <http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov>.

The NCEP is also the primary source for other major weather issues, such as hurricanes and tsunamis, and for the El Niño watch. The synopsis of NCEP's September report puts the chance of El Niño at 60 to 65 percent during fall and winter for the Northern Hemisphere. The National Drought Mitigation Center is the best resource for drought condition assessments and outlooks and for drought impacts. The link to that information is available on the U.S. Drought Monitor map at <http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu>. Several areas in the South are still considered to be suffering moderate to severe drought. The best updates of the impact of weather conditions on lawns and landscapes come through state and regional extension services. All of these have website resources and many have developed special sections geared toward green industry professionals. In many cases you can sign up for periodic updates via emails, blog links, texts or tweets. When concerns develop, you can communicate directly with turfgrass or ornamental specialists by phone or email.



[Click image to enlarge.](#)

Photo: <http://WeatherAdvance.com>

What to expect

Though the coming winter is still just a prediction, looking back at last year may give some indication of what to expect.

Dr. Michael Goatley, turfgrass extension specialist/professor, crop and soil environmental science at Virginia Tech, alludes to the rule of twos. He anticipates a likely repeat of the weather conditions hitting the region last year. "The greatest damages we saw were in the transition zone, especially where people were pushing the edge with some of the warm-season grasses," he says. "We saw tremendous spring dead spot pressure and large patch on Bermuda and Zoysia." "We experienced colder temperatures last year than we'd had for

several years and had large areas of winter kill because of it," says Dr. Jason Kruse, associate professor in the Environmental Horticulture Department of the University of Florida. "We saw damage on nearly all of the warm-season grasses: Bermuda, Zoysia, St. Augustine, centipede and carpet grasses. When temperatures warmed up in the spring, we had more localized damage and disease issues because the winter stress left the grass more susceptible. The issues varied across Florida, with those in the south different from those further north."

"What we had last year was problematic," adds Dr. Clint Waltz, University of Georgia professor and turfgrass extension specialist. "Temperatures dropped to single digits in Atlanta the first week of January and stayed below freezing for 60-plus hours. Snowfall was heavy and, instead of our usual quick melt, snow and ice remained in some protected environments for up to a week."

If those conditions repeat, no matter what precautions you've taken, be prepared for a flurry of customer calls next spring, cautions Waltz. "While winter damage is obvious to lawn care professionals, their customers may need some help recognizing it," he says.

Tips for turf

You can't control the weather, but you can prepare for it. As Goatley says, "You need to be paying attention to any of the warm-season grasses in the transition zone and start prepping them now for going into the winter."

All three turfgrass specialists agree preparation starts with basic agronomics. They recommend taking a soil sample. "Follow the test results to get the pH, phosphorus and potash levels right," Kruse says.

"Especially watch those potassium levels," Waltz adds. Avoid late-fall applications of nitrogen (N), especially on the warm-season grasses. "If you're pushing the vegetative growth as temperatures drop, you'll deplete some of the plants carbohydrate reserves," Kruse says.

Waltz tweeted a recommendation that he anticipated would draw negative feedback: disregard winter fertilizers, he advised, knowing most winterizers contain nitrogen. "The turf will be more resilient going into winter if its energy isn't directed to top growth," he insists.

Kruse suggests raising the height of cut as you move into the cooler months. "You'll produce a little more area for photosynthesis to help store carbohydrates," he explains.

Monitor irrigation needs. Stop irrigating when the turf goes dormant. "Actively growing plants do require water, even when soil temperatures cool and day lengths get shorter, just not as much," Waltz says. "For turf, that could mean dropping to .5 to .75 of an inch a week in October if there's no rainfall. Then scaling back as the soil temperatures continue to cool."

Kruse suggests going with visual cues rather than a clock system at that

point. He says, "Wait to irrigate until the grass indicates it needs it by showing some wilt."

Winter weed control on dormant warm-season grasses can be a good tactic for a better lawn in the spring. "But if you're using a non-selective herbicide, you need to make sure the grass is totally dormant, with no green at all," cautions Kruse.

Tips for ornamentals

Ornamentals require more individualized care than turf, although soil tests, fertilization and irrigation are still important. Watch the pruning schedules to avoid a late-season flush of growth. Warn customers that installing ornamentals not recommended for their particular USDA Growth Zone is risky. Also, advise them to protect valuable plants with mulch. Or, convince them to adopt Goatley's approach: "I plant what I like, enjoy it while it thrives and, if it can't withstand the winter, I try something else."

Suz Trusty is a partner with her husband, Steve, in Trusty & Associates, Council Bluffs, Iowa. She has been involved in the green industry for over 40 years. Contact her at suz@trusty.bz.