*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Summer finally arrives after unusual spring**

Summer is finally here, but continued hijinks by Mother Nature make it anything but normal. And this recently completed spring will be an outlier for phenologists — those who study the cyclical ecological events and their natural timing.

The polar vortex in early May that sent temperatures plunging into the middle teens impacted many trees and bushes on the farm. The oak trees were leafing out but early buds were damaged by the frost, forcing trees to grow new leaves. Luckily, the trees have enough reserve energy in the form of starch that they can re-sprout new leaves. But the lack of foliage on the oak trees stands out among the forest’s tree lines on the hills.

The cold snap kept the annual lilac blooms subdued as well. Every year I look forward to those few magical weeks when the essence of lilac fills the air. The cold killed some of the early buds, leaving us with only a few blooms to enjoy. We’ll know shortly whether our apple trees survived; they bloomed after the hard freeze.

And just when we thought we had escaped the grasp of Jack Frost, we held our breath the last morning of May when frost advisories were out for our part of the state. The National Weather Service in La Crosse said the temperature at the Black River Falls Airport — a traditional cold spot — hit 32 degrees May 31 with a dew point of 32 degrees at 5:15 a.m.

We’re about 15 miles west from there and escaped the frost that time. The cold was short-lived, with temperatures hitting 90 degrees the next week.

A couple of weeks ago I said we needed some rain. I said some — not the 7 inches during two days that one of our neighbors reported. The deluge sent the nearby creek over its banks, but thankfully we had no damage — other than some overflowing gutters that I needed to unplug.

It has been a good spring for planting, though. The weekly crop report for Wisconsin for the end of May said 90 percent of the state’s corn crop was planted — 26 days ahead of 2019’s soggy season and 12 days ahead of average.

“Tillage, small grains, corn, soybeans and potato planting continued to trend ahead of average,” the report said.

Speaking of planting, I’ve discovered by accident a potential new business venture. This spring I have been using the bed of my old truck to haul compost and soil for working on our yard. The compost came from the cleanings of the cow shed three years ago. I had spread it into a large pile; the combination of manure and bedding slowly broke down. The top of the pile is covered with nettles but underneath is nice compost.

The bedliner in my truck caught some of the compost, which mixed with some old grass seed. The combination resulted in green turf starting to grow in the truck bed. Perhaps with a little nurturing in a few weeks I’ll have portable sod. It certainly gives new meaning to going green.

While most farm breakfasts have been canceled this year because of COVID-19, please remember to support dairy farmers this summer. Even with the mass exodus of dairy farmers during the past few years, there are still more than 7,000 licensed dairy herds in Wisconsin. There are 1.26 million cows that produce more than 2.5 billion pounds of milk each month.

The economic impact for Wisconsin is $45.6 billion, supporting 154,000 jobs and generating $1.26 billion in state and local taxes. It’s easy to show support. Put more Wisconsin dairy products in that shopping cart.

*Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at chardie1963@gmail.com.*