



Ecosystem Insights

Advice and Opinions for Organic, Biodynamic, & Holistic Orchardists

Global Climate Change & Uncertainties

30 January 2016

It is unlikely that anyone reading this needs to be convinced of the realities of global climate change. Yet someday we go outside and it's so cold and snowy, we wonder what the heck is really going on. Compared to last year, this winter had been very up and down here in Trumansburg, NY. Very recently it was 50°F with the nice breeze and occasional sunshine; it was a day when anyone could have been out working in the orchard or garden just like it was mid-April. The long-term forecast isn't all that good though. NOAA's projections show a 40-50% chance of above normal temperatures in February and March throughout the northern part of the country. While we're a long way away from the end of winter and anything can happen, this possibility doesn't leave apple growers sleeping well at night. The reality is that global climate change is very real, has very real implications for our orchards, but is also very unpredictable from year to year.

One of the advantages of my consulting job is that I get to travel throughout the northeast and visit many different areas during the growing season. I almost continuously experience first-hand the differences in regional and local growing climates. For example, the Hudson Valley, just a few hours away, can be very different in July and August than it is back home in the Finger Lakes. Likewise, the closer you get to the coast or to large bodies of water like the Great Lakes, the more moderate the climate is, even in the dead of winter.

It was just a few years ago when we had that disaster of a year where fruit farms from Michigan to Massachusetts were destroyed by the early spring warm-up. The past few winters have been better – with last year being the best in recent memory – but it seems we're now back to “normal,” whatever that means. The up and down nature of this winter already – the unseasonably warm December, variable January temperatures, lack of significant snowfall, and now a warmer than normal predicted February and March – means we don't have a clue what this year's apple crop will look like.

What we do know is that our orchards (and orchardists) and the biodiversity they support need a different kind of management to help them weather these changes and uncertainties. Soil and tree health, I believe, are paramount to helping us and our orchards thrive in these uncertain times. And it's not just the uncertain winters and springs, but the heat and drought of summer that seem to be recurring issues, as well. I'll be writing more on the practical implications of climate change and orchard management as we go along. But for now, I'll leave you with this: anything you do that improves dormancy, reduces the potential for dehardening, and keeps those trees asleep longer, the better off your crop will be. There are certain practices that can realistically improve your orchard's chances of surviving a mild winter. For now, tread lightly with your pruning and fertilization until we know more, you'll sleep better at night.

CONTACT: mike@knowyourroots.com ° 845.674.5124 ° 3336 Podunk Road, Trumansburg, NY 14886 ° knowyourroots.com