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Hello Fruit Growers!

Now that the [watermelon berry plants](#) are beginning to sprout (above), it appears that winter is in the rear-view mirror. Anchorage had a cumulative snowfall of 132.6” and tied the record for the second snowiest winter on record. The jury is still out however, as snow is still possible into May!

The past winter’s snow came early in the fall and was prodigious. This was good and bad. The good news was that the ground and the plants covered by the snow were well insulated. Ground temperatures in our orchard were a bit warmer at 6° compared to last winter and never went below 33.5° F. This meant that when spring arrived the water from melting snow seeped away without prolonged pooling on the surface.

On the bad side, the deep snow provided great habitat for voles. If rabbits visited your trees, the snow gave them some extra reach. In addition, the weight of the subsiding and consolidating snow did a bang-up job of breaking any branches caught under the snowpack. I have sympathy as reports of moose, rabbit, porcupine, and vole damage come in. However, this should reinforce the urgency to fence your trees from animals and to do what you can to reduce vole populations during the summer.

April 1 is when we start recording growing degree day (GDD) accumulation. Growing Degree Days (GDD) are measurements of heat units which allow the tracking of plant growth, pest immergence, fruit ripening, etc. The amount of GDDs is totally dependent upon the micro-climate in which you are growing. Having your own personal temperature logger and software to track the GDDs in your yard costs around \$300. It would allow you to know with some certainty what cultivars and varieties stand a chance of fully ripening. Short of that, you can use the pictures below of plant phenology (development) in our orchard to see if your plant growth is ahead or behind what we are reporting. If you are interested in setting up your own temperature logger, just [email me](#) for more more information.



Our orchard is on a South facing slope. This enables better solar capture. Consequently, the snow had completely melted in the orchard by April 26. Whereas the flat and shaded areas of the yard still have snow on the ground. Those areas with snow still have ground temperatures of around 34° F. at 6”, whereas the orchard is already up to an average of 46.5° F. at 6”. At 12” depth, the orchard soil temperature is 44° F. Fruit tree roots become active at around 45° F.

Below is our Growing Degree Day (GDD) accumulation for the month compared with the previous three years.

April 2021: 135 GDD/42°
April 2022: 90 GDD/42°
April 2023: 40 GDD/42°
April 2024: 90 GDD/42°

If you haven’t already, it is time to finish your dormant pruning as most trees are beginning to show bud swell. Because of the weather over the past two seasons, the apple trees this year are expected to flower heavily. You want to take steps to avoid an excessive crop load. A heavy fruit set can push your trees into biennial bearing where you have a bumper crop one year, and nothing the next. We can control an excessive crop load via pruning (removing fruiting wood), thinning fruit spurs with multiple buds, removing flowers, and lastly by thinning the set fruit.

A lot of emphasis is given towards apple tree training and pruning. However, if you grow sour or sweet cherries, your trees will also benefit from pruning. A good general [guide on growing cherries](#) is published by Utah State University Extension.

Below are some suggested tasks to be completed soon:

1. Remove any mulch from strawberries.
2. Prune out last year’s fruiting raspberry canes. Head this year’s fruiting canes at 3-4 feet to generate lateral branches.
3. Untangle and move any new (green) blueberry shoots to a vertical position.
4. [Prune Gooseberries and Currants.](#)
5. Thin haskap (honeyberry) canopy using thinning cuts only.
6. Apply a combination of copper and horticultural oil spray 48 hours before and after a freeze event.
7. Chip all pruning cuts for use in your orchard.

The first fruiting plants to flower in May will be the haskaps. Their flowers are an important food source for the emerging bumblebee queens. Once bloom is finished, it is recommended that you spray your haskaps with Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) to kill the emerging leaf-rollers. While you have it mixed in your sprayer, go ahead and spray your other fruit trees and bushes as well. Remember, Bt often has a shelf life of only a couple years at best. So, when you buy a biological, write the year of purchase on the bottle. Also, my experience is that you will generally find fresher product in your local stores. It is hard to know how long the product has been in inventory when buying from mail order outlets.

If you are participating in the Geneva rootstock trial, the rootstock is expected to ship next week. Depending on the shipping method, it may be available as early as May 11. I will keep everyone posted when the arrival date becomes apparent. Because we are not in control of the shipping, it will not be possible to give a firm date in advance as to when it will be ready for pick-up. But, keep in mind, you get what you pay for!

Often the Geneva rootstocks don’t have a lot of roots when they arrive. However, don’t be concerned. My experience is that they grow a healthy bunch of fine roots rather quickly. You can assist this process by using an inoculant of [fungi and bacteria](#) and some [Hormex B1](#). Just put a couple of gallons of water in a 5-gallon bucket, add your B1 and inoculant, and place your rootstock in it to soak while you pot them up.

Hopefully, the grafts on your rootstock from the grafting workshop in April are beginning to bud out. I recommend that you pot up the rootstock, if you haven’t already, and grow them in the pots for the summer. They will put on more growth by staying in the pot, especially if you put them in a warm sunny location. Then, plant them at the end of August or early September after they have achieved their terminal growth for the season. If fall comes and you are still preparing your planting area, you can continue growing the trees in their pots for a another year or so until your fencing and soil preparation is complete.

Fred Deiser is compiling a list of plums that do well in Alaska. He would like to hear from those who are growing plums. He is interested in what cultivars you are growing, how well they are doing, and the age and location of the trees. If you are growing plums, just click the link to [email Fred](#).

April and May is the time for workshops. Many thanks to Board Secretary Doug Damberg who organized another well-run Grafting Workshop, and our Treasurer Gary Masog who expertly handled the ordering of the rootstock and finances. And of course, a hearty thankyou to all the board members and volunteers who helped organize the rootstock orders, scion wood, and helped make the event a success!

Mid-May is when we can begin grafting on existing trees. We call this top-working, and we will hold two workshops on the topic. The first will be on Saturday, May 4 at 1:30 pm at Mid-Valley Greenhouse in Wasilla. Master grower Dan Elliot will lead that workshop and will demonstrate by top-working some nursery stock. Please note that the workshop will be held on the production side of the greenhouse property at [5331 E Blue Lupine](#).

Two weeks later, on Saturday, May 18, at 1:30 pm, I will lead a workshop on top-working at [Airport Heights Elementary](#) in Anchorage. We will meet in front of the school (Alder Drive) at the trees between the drop-off drive and road. The focus of the demonstration will be topworking Prunus Maackii (Amur chokecherry) with tart cherries. The school is just down the block from Fire Island Bakery if you need lunch or a treat.

Then on Saturday, June 1 at 1:30pm, we will have our first orchard tour of the summer. Our hosts will be Randy and Sonja Arduser who own and operate the Clark Orchard. This is an historic property regarding fruit growing in Alaska, and it is always beautiful to see mature trees in bloom. More information will be forthcoming as we get closer to the event.

All the best,

Mark Wolbers
President, APFGA

