

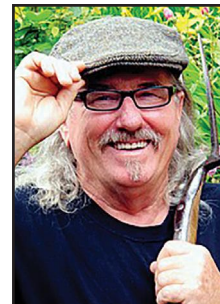
Blackberry Winter

Woof. That last cold snap was rough. Even for those of us who expected the usual freeze that we usually get in late March.

Happens every year, or nearly so, though a lot of gardeners talk as if it never happened before. There's even a name for it: blackberry winter. A warm spell that causes wild blackberries to come into glorious bloom and gives us feel-good spring fever hormones. Then, seemingly overnight, it all gets dashed by a freeze and/or cold rains.

Normally not a big deal, but this one was extra rough, maybe a bit worse because of the unusually warm March, which followed last December's sudden flash freeze which even defoliated my nandinas and killed my bay laurel. My records show that last year's roses in Jackson were in peak bloom on April

10; this year the same plants came into full bloom in mid-March - a month early, leaving the plants being too tender to survive the late freeze.



FELDER RUSHING

It's notable how more native plants like the native pink azaleas fared better than their more blousy Asian counterparts, which froze and wilted. Even wisteria lost its flowers and early foliage. My fig tree had new leaves and blueberries were starting to make little fruits, but it's all wilted or browned out. The figs will probably leaf back out, maybe even make a few figs. Remains to be seen if I salvaged a few blueberries by covering them to the ground with plastic draped over tomato stakes.

All this was caused by how a lot of plants were fooled by the extra "chilling hours" - above freezing but below - above freezing but below

time to start spring growth. Different plants require different chilling hours, with those in northern counties needing more than those on the coast; it is why cherries, lilacs, and a lot of apples don't do so well in Mississippi, because most require over a thousand chilling hours to flower, which they rarely get here. But most plants got their chilling hours too early, leading to cold damage to tender buds.

Not all was lost. The figs and nipped roses will survive, browned cannas will come back, as will the badly damaged cast iron plant (*Aspidistra*). Bees are already buzzing around looking for flowers that made it.

And I knew from decades of experience to not get lulled by early warm weather; I always wait to plant summer stuff like peppers, tomatoes, basil, and zinnias until April, because whether or not it freezes again, the soil and rains usually remain cold which leads to root and stem rot. Besides, I already had cold-tolerant

veggies in my garden, including colorful lettuces, cabbage, garlic, Irish potatoes, kale, and English peas, parsley, flowering sweet peas, violas and pansies, a new planting of snapdragons, and purple shamrocks, all which did fine, enough to keep me happy.

I do make sure to leave room between winter flowers and veggies to tuck summer stuff later, making my garden an easy, continual process rather than a plant-everything-at-once marathon. So, I'm not in a rush to set out summer stuff.

It's legal, of course, to gamble in the garden, but don't bet more than you are willing to lose on what you read in the old almanacs, which (sorry to bust the bubble) are merely advertising publications with lots of retreaded lore and planting dates conjured up by editors who live in New England. Just forget it. Trust what farmers already know and wait till later in April.

And next year, plan ahead. Blackberry winter is predict-



NATIVE AZALEAS FARED BETTER THAN IMPORTS

able. *Felder Rushing is a Mississippi author, columnist, and host of the "Gestalt Garden-er" on MPB Think Radio. Email gardening questions to rushingfelder@yahoo.com.*

Miss. sets tighter restrictions on absentee ballots

By Emily Wagster Pettus JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — Mississippi will set tighter restrictions on who can gather other people's absentee ballots, under a bill that Gov. Tate Reeves signed Wednesday.

The Republican governor said the law, which takes effect July 1, will ban political operatives from collecting and handling large numbers of absentee ballots. Reeves described the practice as "ballot harvesting," a pejorative term for

dropping off completed ballots for other people.

"This process is an open invitation for fraud and abuse, and can occur without the voter ever even knowing," Reeves said in a video statement.

Opponents said the new restrictions could hurt candidates, campaign workers, nursing home employees or others who make good-faith efforts to help people obtain and mail absentee ballots.

"This bill will make all of you criminals if you go

and assist anybody with getting an absentee ballot. And that's wrong," Democratic Rep. Willie Bailey of Greenville told fellow House members during a March 7 debate. "It is no good. It is a part of a system going around the country, suppressing people's right to vote in a democratic society."

Republican-led states have tightened rules on voting by mail since the 2020 presidential election, in part because of the false narra-

tive of widespread fraud in that race.

Unlike some states that allow widespread use of voting by mail, Mississippi already restricts the reasons people may vote by absentee ballot. The absentee ballots are available — by mail or for early, in-person voting — to Mississippi voters who are 65 or older; any voter who has a temporary or permanent physical disability, or any voter who is that person's caretaker; or any voter who will be away

from their home county on election day, including college students.

Mississippi's new law takes effect a few weeks before the state's Aug. 8 party primaries for statewide, regional, legislative and county elections.

The law sets a short list of people who can "collect and transmit" a ballot that was mailed to another person. That list includes employees of the U.S. Postal Service or other mail carriers, plus any "family member,

household member or caregiver of the person to whom the ballot was mailed."

Any violation of the law will be punishable by up to a year in a county jail, a \$3,000 fine or both.

The House passed the bill 73-44 on March 7, with most of the support coming from Republicans and most of the opposition from Democrats. The Senate passed the final version 33-13 on March 14, with a similar partisan divide.

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