

Trees may be the cause of that sneeze

By **Dan Naumovich**

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The unseasonably warm winter was tough on many people. Kids who got sleds for Christmas, guys who attached plows to their pickups and even those who simply enjoy a nice winter landscape all took it on the chin.

As winter turned to spring, another group of people are feeling the effects of our Floridian winter. Even before the first pitch is thrown on baseball's opening day, the allergy season is in full swing.

"People are starting to come in with symptoms now, when they usually wouldn't come in until April 1, or April 10 in previous years," said Dr. Glennon Paul, who specializes in allergy and immunology at Central Illinois Allergy & Respiratory Clinic in Springfield.

"If it doesn't turn cold, and I don't think it will (get better), the (allergy) season is going to be twice as long," Paul said.

David Robson of University of Illinois Extension is an expert on trees and plants, the culprits in all of this discomfort. His prognosis isn't much rosier.

"It depends on how much the plants — in this case the trees more than anything else — start producing their pollen. Of course, if the flowers are starting to bloom and the catkins start coming out and then we get hit by a frost, well then that's going to be really great for us. But what we can probably expect is that we'll be suffering earlier this year," Robson said.

Catkins are flower clusters that serve as the male in a tree's reproductive system. They contain millions of pollen grains that are released into wind for the purpose of finding the female flower for pollination.

But the pollen also finds its way into people's respiratory systems where they cause sneezing and watering eyes, among other symptoms. Trees not known for their flowers — oak, birch, hickory, and chestnut, for example — are the biggest offenders.

"Anything that has a pretty flower, like the magnolias that are blooming right now, we don't worry about that because generally speaking the prettier the flower, the more likely that it's pollinated by insects, which means the pollen is heavy and probably won't blow," Robson said.

A spring frost could help alleviate much suffering by killing off the wind-pollinated flowers. Although Robson is an allergy sufferer, as a plant lover he can't wish for such a fate.

"I'm more worried about some of the damage to some of the other plants. Personally I'd rather suffer than see a lot of freezes this time of year. I'm not talking about temperatures down into the 30s. Lower than 28, that's what I really worry about," he said.

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