

Chris Taggart

From: MSU Ravalli County Extension <ravalli@msuravallcountyextension.ccsend.com>
Sent: Friday, February 20, 2026 9:04 AM
To: Chris Taggart
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Warm Winters In Montana



Haskap showing bud break near shoot tips. (Photo: Zach Miller, Bitterroot)

Growing Implications of This Winter in Montana

February 10, 2026:

Warm Winters

**By: Zach Miller, Associate Professor/Superintendent MSU Western
Agriculture Research Center**

It's been an extremely warm start to winter. Some fruit plants (Haskap/Honeyberry, Currants, Elderberry) are budding out and getting less cold tolerant. Other fruiting plants like cherries, apple, and pear are holding tight but will likely have an early start as their (relatively higher) chill requirements will be met earlier than normal. For plants that are budding out like Haskap, we don't know precisely what temperatures will damage these buds.

We did send some Honeyberry (Aurora and Blizzard) shoots to WSU-MT. Vernon a few weeks ago to be tested in a freeze chamber. The terminal buds (more open) had freeze damage somewhere between 0 and -18 F. Even at -18, the lateral buds (less swollen) were not damaged.

It's going to be a worry filled end of winter. I put this cold temperature risk calendar together help define when we may be out of the woods and able to worry less.

Monitor your fruit plants for bud swell and break. As they come out of dormancy, they'll lose some cold tolerance. I've included several relevant temperature thresholds and links to fruit bud killing temperatures at various stages of bud break.

[Cold Risk in Winter Spring for the Bitterroot](#)

[Fruit Table](#)

Pruning in Warm Winters

By: Dr. Peter Kolb, MSU Extension Forester

Such warm weather events are not entirely uncommon across Montana. Most of our native tree species need a minimum chilling period before they are able to break dormancy. There is a chance that this freezing requirement has not yet been met, which studies have shown can cause a delay in tree's breaking dormancy. Some tree species are also triggered by diurnal daylight ratios rather than temperature. There are many factors that are regional, species and even genotypic in their response to cold dormancy.

Swelling buds in trees is pretty normal and high sugar content of swelling buds helps with frost resistance. Bud burst – leaf development however

means game over and the new leaves and meristematic tissue is now very vulnerable to damage from severe cold (less than 30F).

So for those folks worried about your trees my advice is not to change the timing of what you normally do. If your soil is very dry watering trees is good, even this time of year, but do not fertilize as that can stimulate an earlier break in dormancy. That said, in most places the soil is still very frozen and will not absorb water so make certain the soil can take water or surface ice formation on a tree stem can cause damage.

Pruning trees in March, especially epicormic sprouts should still be the protocol. If you prune now, which is also OK, use pruning paint on cuts larger than ½ inch as freeze thaw events can cause vascular tissue to freeze-dry before the tree becomes physiologically active and able to actively seal off injuries. If your trees start to leaf out, and below freezing temperatures start to occur spraying the leafed out area with water than then freezes on the leaves can slow the freezing injury by about 5 degrees. If your trees are small enough, tarping leafed out trees before an extreme cold event can help as even frozen soil radiates some warmth toward the tree under the tarp.

On the opposite spectrum, smaller trees next to the south side of your house can be tarped on very warm days as the heat radiated from your house wall or roof can exacerbate the problem – thus shielding them from the radiant heat of the house can help keep them dormant. Conifers, oaks and lindens should be Ok as they are strongly daylength triggered. Zone 4-5 fruit trees, green ash, poplar and Siberian elms are pretty easily fooled and the ones to keep an eye on.

A lot will depend on future weather and how fast and extreme any future cold snaps occur.

Warm Winter Weather IPM URBAN Alert

By: Abi Saaed, MSU Extension Horticulture Specialist

With unseasonably warm temperatures resembling spring more than winter in much of Montana, we have been receiving many pruning questions. To learn more about the accelerated development of plants that we have seen throughout the state over the past couple of months and gain a better

understanding of the dormancy process in plants, check out the Urban IPM Alert from December 22nd.

With a state like Montana, our temperatures can be extremely unpredictable, and making decisions about plant health and productivity can be challenging to say the least. Late winter and early spring are common times to prune trees and shrubs in Montana. This winter has been much warmer than usual, and many are unsure how to proceed. Although it is difficult to say what might happen over the next few weeks (in terms of temperature and plant development), we hope that some of these suggestions may help you reduce potential damage to your woody plants as a result of pruning.

Once trees and shrubs begin active growth (including bud development) after dormancy, this process cannot be reversed. The buds at or near the tip of shoots come out of dormancy sooner and can slow development of buds lower on the shoot. Although dormant buds can withstand cold temperatures (see link to temperature tolerance of buds in resources), once they begin to swell, their cold tolerance is significantly reduced. Some of the woody plants that we are seeing early bud development this year (though it depends on your location in the state) include: Honeysuckle (including Haskap/Honeyberry), Forsythia, Red/Silver Maple, Ornamental Pears, Aspen, Willow, Elm, Birch, Currant, Elderberry, and Viburnum.

In plants that have begun bud growth: heading cuts (when you remove part of a stem/branch) at this time of year, could release the lower buds from dormancy (and potentially encourage additional growth that could be susceptible to freeze damage). Thinning cuts (when you remove an entire stem/branch up to a larger lateral branch and/or the trunk) should be fine to do during a favorable weather window (when temps are between 40 - 60 F, and ideally at least 2-5 days before temperatures are predicted to drop below 25 F, which can cause further damage at the pruning sites if the plants haven't been able to compartmentalize properly). Be careful not to disturb and damage existing buds when removing branches.

If you want to make heading cuts, it may be better to wait a few more weeks before doing so- when the risk of hard freeze or extreme temperature drops is lower than in months like February. The risks are: when heading cuts are made on a branch, the buds at nodes within a few to several inches below where the cut was made could be encouraged to begin new growth. This new growth is tender (less cold hardy than dormant buds) and susceptible to damage when temperatures are at or below freezing. Additionally, if pruning

cuts were made and temperatures were to drop: cold injury at the site of the pruning cuts could potentially result in more freezing damage throughout the cut branch than if we wait to make those cuts when the risk of freezing temperatures is lower.

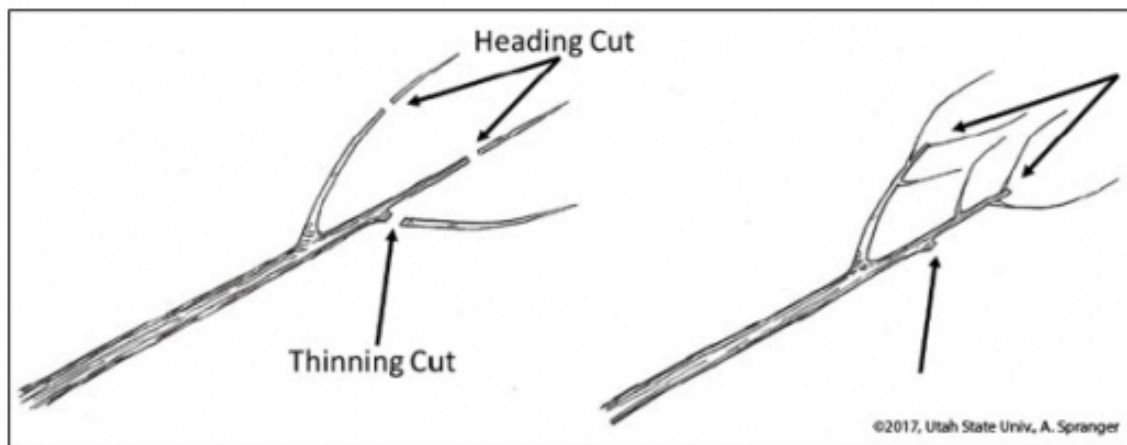


Illustration of heading and thinning cuts (Utah State University)





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STATE UNIVERSITY**

EXTENSION

Ravalli County

Ravalli County MSU Extension
406.375.6611
ravalli@montana.edu
<https://ravalli.msueextension.org/>

MSU Ravalli County Extension | 215 S 4th Street Suite G 215 S 4th Street Suite G | Hamilton,
MT 59840 US

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