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Why We Need Winter

With the weather events we've had, we can all say that we are ready for winter to be over, except for the kids. However, sometimes it's important to consider why we need winter. To be more specific, consider why our plants need winter.

In plants, a cold requirement is called vernalization. It is a chilling period necessary to induce flowering in some plant species. Two immediate examples of cold requiring plants are creeping phlox and winter wheat. As the name implies, winter wheat is in the ground right now because it needs about four to eight weeks of temperatures below 50* to flower and develop a grain head.

Creeping phlox, *Phlox subulata*, is the horticultural example. Early spring brings wide carpets of color from this perennial. However, after an initial flow, the blooms are gone for the rest of the year. Some plants may have a cold requirement, but the driving force of their flowering is based on photoperiod. These plants include Astilbe, Lavender, and Columbine. The biological reason for this concerns the specific timing of flowering, which also relates to pollinators—making sure that the plant and pollinator are on the same schedule benefits both parties.

In seed germination, this is the process of stratification. Stratification indoors is done by layering the seeds in damp paper towels and then leaving them in a cold area or refrigerator. This mimics natural weather. Stratification prevents early germination and helps ensure the seed's survival after inclement weather has passed. It is only necessary when seeding some species of plants in the spring, as fall plantings will see cold weather naturally.

Whether you love or hate the snow, there is a reason for every season, and without winter, our plants would be worse come spring. Stay warm; spring isn't too far off!

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