

Europe's winter warmth puts nature in tailspin

January 1 2016, by Angus Mackinnon And Jordane Bertrand In Bordeaux



People enjoy the sun and warm temperatures on the "Promenade des Anglais" in Nice, southeastern France, on December 28, 2015

The daffodils are out in London, plum trees are blossoming in Milan and asparagus tips are pushing through the soil in eastern France.

Across Europe, unseasonably warm [winter weather](#) has left the natural world in a spin with plants, insects and animals convinced Spring must

be just around the corner.

The disruption of established weather patterns has put strawberries on festive menus in France, ensured an abundance of game in Germany's woodlands and seen tomatoes ripen for an exceptional third time this year on Italian balconies.

With grass still growing in the north of Scotland well into December, the famous Royal Dornoch links put the traditional switch to winter greens on hold and kept its mowers buzzing into the final days of 2015.

But alongside the serendipitous consequences for gourmets and golfers, unusual climatic conditions have also been linked to more unsettling trends.

Scientists and gardeners alike fret over whether this year reflects a worrying new normal created by [global climate change](#).

More than 2,000 wildfires have ravaged swaths of northern Spain in recent weeks thanks to a combination of unusually warm weather and high winds.



Firefighters tackle a blaze in an area affected by wildfires near the Basque town of Berango in northern Spain on December 28, 2015

Farmers across Europe meanwhile are grappling with the hard-to-predict implications of conditions which, while boosting the production of some crops, may reduce yields of others and allow pests to thrive later in the year due to the absence of a sustained winter cold spell to kill them off.

Strawberries for Christmas

"It is strange to see how certain plants are already flowering crazily," said Hans-Jurgen Packheiser, a 76-year-old beekeeper from Halver in Germany's North Rhine-Westphalia region.

"Some of the bees in my hives are already out and about looking for nectar. They think winter is already finished."

In the Dordogne region of southwestern France, strawberry producers were surprised to see plants that would normally have to be protected from frost from mid-November onwards continue to bear fruit right up to Christmas.

"Even my father-in-law, who has been producing strawberries since 1956, has never seen anything like it," said Patricia Rebillou, the president of the local producers' association.

It is a similar story in Alsace, where amateur gardener Rene Wolfhugel was able to harvest enough asparagus for his Christmas Eve dinner, four months earlier than normal for a vegetable that traditionally heralds the arrival of Spring.



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"When I saw the tips pushing through, I could hardly believe my eyes. I had to call my neighbours to come and see," Wolfhugel told AFP. "They were excellent, just as good as in the Spring."

For French market gardener Jean-Louis Durrieux, the disruption of seasonal rhythms is less welcome.

"I have been doing this for 30 years and I've never seen lettuces so far advanced at this time of year. Salad leaves that we would normally harvest in mid-January were ready at the start of December."

With similar conditions across Europe, the result was a glut of ready-to-

harvest plants which had left him with no choice but to throw away 60 percent of his October plantings, Durrieux said.

Year-round eggs

It has been a similar story for wild or ornamental plants.

On the French Riviera and in the Basque country straddling Spain and France, Mimosas which would normally not flower until the end of January are already in full bloom, disconcerting florists who struggle to sell them at this time of year.

"They are magnificent this year," said Valerie Torres a grower in Bormes-Les-Mimosas. "But the season for them is going to be shortened because they don't sell particularly well over Christmas."

Wild Fuchsia, which normally stops flowering in the autumn on the Atlantic coast of Britain and Ireland, remains in full bloom on the Isle of Islay, off the west coast of Scotland.

Local residents Steve and Mary Bavin were half-astonished, half-delighted when their hens resumed laying on November 30.

"It is nice to have fresh eggs in the winter but it is also worrying because along with the higher temperatures we also seem to be getting a lot more rain and wind," said Steve Bavin.

Stephane Longuepez, an official with the northern French city of Lille's parks and gardens department, also indicated that a precocious Spring was not to be welcomed.

"It is easy to think that with the good weather, everything will grow better," he said. "But bulbs like tulips might not all flower this year

because they need a cold winter spell for their development which they won't have had."

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