

Early Spring is upon us: Gardens, Hemlocks, and Hikes

Low humidity, clear skies, and sunshine in late winter are some of the best times for long range views from the parkway or atop other mountain vistas like Stone Mountain or Pilot Mountain State Parks. It's also a great time to catch views through the forest that will soon disappear when the leaves emerge. Views of the forest floor are also starting to change on the trail as trout lilies sprout. It's also getting very close to time to find the elusive Morel Mushroom, a native wild mushroom that fruits only in the early spring. It's a good time to get outside and enjoy our beautiful part of the world.

February featured some of the warmest days ever recorded in North Carolina, but March and early April can include unpredictable cold snaps and even snow. Brushy Mountain orchards have reported peaches in full bloom and apples showing signs of budding. Despite the microclimates present on the slopes of Brushy's, we've recently had a couple of freezes that have probably resulted in loss of early fruit crops. This is why orchards plant multiple varieties with different blooming tendencies.

If choosing to plant an early garden, seed or transplant only very hardy crops such as brassicas, spinach, carrots and onions. It would be wise to wait a couple weeks before lettuce is planted outside without some kind of protection like a row cover. The last average frost date for the Elkin area is the end of April or early May. Crops like tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant can be seeded inside now and planted outside after the risk of frost.

With days getting longer, it is a great time to walk in the woods and observe the brightening up of evergreens as they begin to drink water and come out of their dormant state. The Eastern Hemlock is an iconic evergreen native to our region. It is a cone shaped tree that grows in cool places on north slopes and streams. It can be found all over the Appalachian Mountains and foothills from northern Alabama into New England and into Canada. Hemlocks can be observed locally in downtown Elkin with one stately example next to the bridge on west Main Street across from the library. Eastern Hemlocks are also seen mixed with non-native Norway Spruce and China fir trees at the new Railyard behind Harry's. This tree is also found along the Big Elkin Creek and Mountains to Sea trail, and in more abundance at Stone Mountain State Park and the upper Mitchell River.

However, in the Southern Appalachians especially, this tree is in trouble. First seen in Virginia around 1995, an invasive insect known as the hemlock Woolly Adelgid is ravaging the Eastern Hemlock. It is originally from Asia, where it has native predators, but this pest has spread all over the southeast. The Hemlock Woolly Adelgid kills almost all the Hemlock trees it infests by stopping the tree's ability to take up nutrients, causing needles to fall, and the tree to perish. Our regional forests, even in more protected places like Stone Mountain, have changed a great deal since the dying of the hemlocks began.

The death of hemlocks along creek banks has a larger impact than one might imagine. The Eastern hemlock has provided year round shade along creeks, keeping the unique aquatic

ecosystems cool. However as most of the large hemlocks have died, there is not another evergreen in our region to replace it. White Pines could provide some shade, but generally have a different growing habit. Without hemlocks on the stream banks, the forest floor or stream could become warmer and less suitable for species that have adapted to that environment such as trout.

There are some efforts to save the hemlocks. In North Carolina, the Hemlock Restoration Initiative is actively saving hemlocks, planting hemlocks, and teaching others how to save them on their own property. The only current option for saving hemlocks is treating them with pesticides. The Woolly Adelgid can be successfully controlled with systemic treatment. The goal with the current treatment approach is that some trees can make it long enough for more solutions to be identified or adaptations to take place. If you identify hemlocks on your property, early Spring is the best time to treat them. Instructions for identifying and treating the pest can be found on HRI's website at <https://savehemlocksnc.org/>.

Please stay in contact with Watershed Now and Friends of Big Elkin Creek for stewardship information and watershed protection.

www.watershednownc.com