

Woolly Worms, Weather, and Waitin' on Spring (published 2026-01-24)

By Wes Walker, Master Gardener

When the garden beds are tucked in, seed catalog pages are dog-eared throughout, and the compost pile has gone suspiciously quiet, gardeners in Northeast Tennessee do what they've always done: we start watching everything else.

Long before weather apps and scrolling forecasts, people in this region paid close attention to what the land was saying. Not just how cold winter might be, but how long it planned to stay. Those observations still surface today, especially among gardeners who know that an early warm spell can be more dangerous than a hard freeze.

This way of reading the landscape is how many of our forebears made their best guesses about winter's harshness and spring's arrival. With no extended forecasts to consult, they watched plants, animals, insects, and the sky itself for clues. These observations weren't meant to predict the future with certainty, but to guide decisions about preparation and patience—less about being right, and more about being ready.

One of the most enduring signs involves cracking open hickory nuts or black walnuts and studying the meat inside. Old-timers say the shape tells a story. Full, plump nut meat suggests a winter that does its duty and moves on. Thin or shriveled meat hints that winter may linger. And when the nut meat forms a clear heart shape, folklore warns that winter will hang on longer than expected, tugging at spring well into March. Gardeners who find heart-shaped nut meat often take it as a reminder not to rush soil prep or early plantings just because February feels friendly.

Another familiar sign is the woolly bear caterpillar. Around here, folks still pause to watch one cross a driveway or trail. The caterpillar's black and brown bands are said to hint at the coming winter, with a wider black stripe suggesting longer or colder conditions. Whether accurate or not, the woolly bear remains part of the seasonal conversation and a gentle reminder to slow down and pay attention.

Fog plays a role, too. In the valleys and along river bottoms, many gardeners still count heavy foggy mornings in August. Tradition says the number of fogs foretells how many winter snow events or prolonged cold spells might slow spring soil warming. It's less about exact snowfall totals and more about pacing expectations for when the ground will truly be ready again.

Trees offer their own clues. When white and red oaks cling stubbornly to their leaves well into winter, gardeners say the cold isn't finished teaching its lesson. Thick hickory and walnut shells are taken as a sign of a winter that intends to wear on people and plants alike. Squirrels hoarding nuts early, before leaf drop, often reinforce the message that winter may overstay its welcome.

None of these signs come with guarantees, and gardeners know that. What they offer instead is patience. Watching nature closely keeps us from being fooled by a warm February afternoon that tempts us to plant peas too soon.

Of course, no winter garden conversation would be complete without mentioning The Farmer's Almanac. Every late fall, it appears on store shelves predicting winter conditions months—and even a full year—in advance. Snowy, mild, bitter, or dry, all laid out with remarkable confidence. This is particularly impressive considering that modern National Weather Service models, armed with satellites and supercomputers, admit forecast accuracy drops sharply beyond about a month. Gardeners tend to take the Almanac the same way they take woolly worms and heart-shaped nuts: with interest, humor, and a backup plan.

Then there's our Pennsylvania prognosticator, Punxsutawney Phil. Each winter, many of us pause—if only briefly—to see whether he spots his shadow and what that might mean for winter's remaining length. Accurate or not, it has become a familiar milestone on the winter calendar, marking the point when we all start looking a little harder toward spring.

What these old signs really teach isn't how to outguess the weather, but how to live with it. They encourage observation, preparation, and restraint. For gardeners especially, winter isn't just something to endure. It's a time to regroup, reflect, and quietly prepare for the work that lies ahead when the soil warms again. These old prognostications may not offer a crystal-clear view of what winter—or spring—will bring, but they do give us something far more reliable: conversation. The real magic of these sayings isn't whether they're accurate, but that they bring people together to talk, compare notes, and share time with like-minded folks.

So, while chilly temperatures may keep you from a robust planting schedule, take a few minutes to watch the wildlife, notice the weather, and enjoy a good chat with your fellow gardening enthusiasts. The earth is reenergizing and so should we. Until next time, keep workin' the dirt.

Resources

“16 Old Wives’ Tales Predict Winter Weather,” <https://www.agriculture.com/16-old-wives-tales-predict-winter-weather-7538966>

“13 Old-Fashioned Winter Weather Folklore Sayings of Yesteryear,”
<https://thehomesteadguide.com/winter-weather-folklore/>

“Punxsutawney Phil: The Groundhog Behind the Myth,’ <https://www.livescience.com/8076-punxsutawney-phil-groundhog-myth.html>

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.