By Kylee Baumle

Oh, we love our traditions, weather folklore, and old wives' tales, don't we? The woolly worms have predicted a cold winter (aren't they all?) as long as you encountered the right kind of caterpillar. We're heading into the down side of January and we just experienced the "January thaw."

Just what is that anyway? Is it real or just another one of those folklore things? Do things really thaw out?

Yes, Virginia, there is a January thaw. And yes, some things do thaw out. Towards the end of January, the temperatures warm up enough to melt snow and the top layer of ground thaws sufficiently enough to make things a little slushy and muddy. You start thinking that maybe spring will be early this year, but then you remember how much of a tease Old Man Winter can be.

I remember when we had our exchange student from Ecuador about 20 years ago. Karina thought when the calendar announced March 21 as the first day of spring, we wouldn't have snow anymore. It would suddenly be warm and the flowers would bloom and we could put away our coats. Since she lives just 10 miles from the equator in the Andes Mountains, every day there is pretty much the same – like spring – perfect and glorious, so this change of seasons thing was new to her.

I told her how the weather changes gradually and if the change is too abrupt, we run the risk of tornadoes. Before winter was really over, she had a better understanding of things.

The January thaw is a recognized weather event called a "blip" or "singularity." That means it happens more regularly than it would if by chance. It occurs mainly in the Great Lakes, New England, and Maritime Provinces of North America during the third week of January, on average. For several days, the temperatures reach levels that are at least 10 degrees above

normal and at these latitudes, they're above freezing, causing things to thaw somewhat.

"The January thaw is special because it opens winter's door a crack just when it seems that the ice has locked it tight. Through that crack one can see the certainty of March and April somewhere up ahead. The worst one can say about the January thaw is that it never lasts. It lifts the heart, then drops it with a cold thud when the warm spell passes and the chill congeals the earth again. But when January does relent, even for a day or two, we can celebrate, cautiously." – Hal Borland, in Sundial of the Seasons

In some winters we don't experience a January thaw, and while it's not entirely known why it happens, its occurrence is real and recognized by meteorologists, just as is Indian summer, a similar event that happens on the other side of winter.

Now we could have a blizzard next week, and next month we might have a day or two of what I call "teaser days," when the temperatures warm again as we start our transition into spring. In any case, the days are getting longer now and soon we'll see the brave little snowdrops pushing their way through the soil. Hang on – spring will be here before we know it. (Hurry, please.)

Read more at Kylee's blog, Our Little Acre, at www.ourlittleacre.com and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/OurLittleAcre. Contact her at PauldingProgressGardener@gmail.com.