By Kylee Baumle

Just two more days and another January will be history! And on Saturday, we get to find out if we're getting an early spring again this year. It's time for Buckeye Chuck to make his annual appearance and give us his expert opinion about the weather. His cousin, Punxsutawney Phil, lives one state to our east and is the one most of the country will be watching on Feb. 2.

Buckeye Chuck is Ohio's resident prognosticator and since 1979, holds the title of Ohio's Official Groundhog. He's been predicting weather since the early '70s, but the tradition has its origins in Germany and says that if the groundhog emerges from his hole and sees his shadow, there will be six more weeks of winter weather.

If Chuck doesn't see his shadow on Saturday, supposedly there will be an early spring. He's got a good record going in recent years, when he's accurately predicted an early spring. This may or may not fall under the heading of phenology, defined on Wikipedia as the study of periodic plant and animal life cycle events and how these are influenced by seasonal and interannual variations in climate, as well as habitat factors.

I think it's just the luck of the draw as to whether the sun happens to be shining on the given date. Folklore is fun, and in Punxsutawney, Pa., it's big business, but phenology is another matter. Past records of when particular plants and trees leaf out can be helpful in predicting local weather trends; so can the behavior of insects. I've kept track of when the first lightning bug appeared in our yard each year and with very few exceptions, it has been within a few days of the first day of summer.

Two years ago, when spring arrived about three weeks ahead of schedule, the lightning bugs showed up on June 6, the earliest I'd ever seen them. I'd had a feeling that spring was going to be early that year, because I'd noticed the goldfinches coloring up at the end of January! Unfortunately for this year, they were still wearing their muddy yellow coats when I saw them at the feeder last week.

The return of the red-winged blackbird is considered to be a phenological sign of the arrival of spring here, and a friend told me she'd seen one at her place a week or so ago. Aberrations are always possible, but my lilacs are breaking bud, in spite of the bitter cold weather we had recently. The snowdrops are showing color and the witch hazel bloomed in mid-January. Time will tell whether or not they're true seasonal indicators or just a winter gone wacky.

About a year ago, the USDA issued an updated hardiness zone map – the first since 1990 – which placed nearly everyone nationwide in half a zone warmer than they were before, including most of Paulding County. We were Zone 5b before and are now in Zone 6a, with the exception of a part of the western side of the county, which remains in Zone 5b. (The new map can be found at http://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/PHZMWeb/#)

The new map is based on average coldest temperatures for each location over the 30 years from 1976 to 2005. The previous map was based on only a 13-year period from 1974 to 1986, and used fewer data reporting stations. In addition, the new map takes into consideration some additional data that the old one didn't, such as changes in elevation and the proximity to large bodies of water, which can temper the climate.

Hardiness zone maps and the corresponding hardiness ratings on plant tags are important guidelines for gardeners when it comes to making informed choices as to what we will grow. Years of experience and being observant helps, too.

Whether or not Chuck sees his shadow on Saturday may not affect how soon I can expect to get in the garden, but I'll secretly be praying for a cloudy day.

Read more at Kylee's blog, Our Little Acre, at www.ourlittleacre.com and on Facebook at

Will Buckeye Chuck bring us good news? Wednesday, January 30, 2013 4:32 PM

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