



PHOTO BY KEVIN P. COUGHLIN

Here's what might happen next

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Old Man Winter may have been gentler on Long Island this season, but the milder months may lead to hardships come spring and summer.

Expect more insects buzzing around, an increase in algal blooms on coastal waters, and an earlier start to the watery eyes and stuffy nose torment of allergy season, experts say.

"With every anomaly there is the potential to create other hazards," said Tim Morrin, observation program leader for the

National Weather Service's Brookhaven National Laboratory in Upton.

Temperatures were 5 degrees warmer this winter than usual, making it the third-warmest Long Island winter on record, Morrin said. From December through February — the three months the National Weather Service classifies as winter — the average temperature was 38.3 degrees at Long Island-MacArthur Airport in Islip, slightly cooler than the 38.7 degrees that made 2001-02 the warmest.

Typically, winters have averaged 30 degrees on Long Island, according to

data dating back to 1986.

Just 4.4 inches of snow has dusted Islip this winter — nearly 15 inches below the normal of 19.2 inches, according to the weather service.

While last year's brutal winter battered the shorelines of several area beaches, the cold spell kept algae levels in check and helped control insect populations. But as this year's tepid winter goes out like a lamb with highs in the 60s forecast for the next seven days, biologists, beach managers and county health experts alike evaluate how it will affect the Island:

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Crops & Gardens

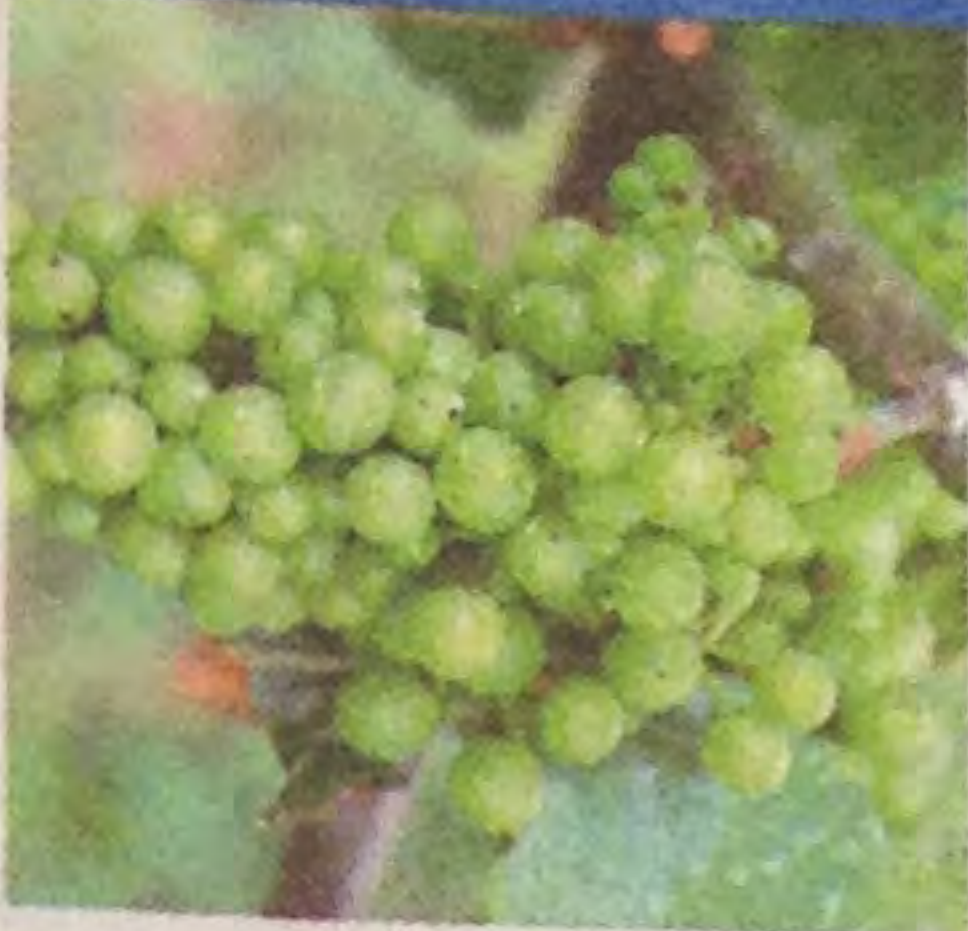
Long Island's vineyard growers can toast a harvest not damaged by subzero temperatures.

"Generally, mild winters are not a problem for vineyards," said Alice Wise, a viticulture researcher with the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.

"We are fortunate on the East End of Long Island to have a profound maritime influence on our climate," Wise said. "This keeps our winters from getting as cold as areas inland."

Long Island's vineyards tend to bud break around May 1, but may start sooner because of the earlier spring weather, Wise said. The prospect of an early bud break has some local growers concerned that their crops may be at risk if a late-spring frost hits the area, though meteorologists with the national Climate Prediction Center expect the warming trend to continue through the spring.

"It's really all in Mother Nature's



hands," said Miguel Martin, a winemaker at Palmer Vineyards in Riverhead.

Homeowners and gardeners will have two complications this season — weeds and brown leaves, said Julie Seghrouchni, horticulture and community forestry educator for the

Cornell Cooperative Extension of Nassau County.

"Weeds germinate faster in warmer soil," Seghrouchni said. "The warmer temperatures give the opportunity for more germination of the many weed seeds that are always in the soil, but do not always germinate."

As for local foliage, evergreens may show browning and drop more leaves, having lost more water from the milder temperatures, Seghrouchni said. To reduce the threat of weeds, Seghrouchni recommends homeowners overseed in the spring to fill the spaces where weeds can grow, and to irrigate properly.

PHOTO BY AMANDA DEANGELIS

Insect Infestation

Many bugs may be more prevalent during the spring and summer months because there hasn't been a harsh frost to wipe out large swarms of insect eggs, Seghrouchni said.

Birch and dogwood borers, which spent winters inside trees or in people's homes, could actually benefit from the warmer winter, she said. They tend to cause damage by destroying the tissues that provide nutrients to plants.

Adding to the pest proliferation, many of the insects — like hover flies and ground beetles — that attack other harmful critters may now have their life cycles out of sync with the pests they help regulate, Seghrouchni said.

So what should green thumbs do to keep bugs at bay?

"The best things to do is to plant properly, water properly, choose the right plant," Seghrouchni said. "The stronger the plant, the less susceptible to insect attack. Also continue to moni-



USDA PHOTO

tor the plants, so if an insect is attacking it, it is much easier to get under control when the population is small."

Though mosquitoes have been of special concern to Nassau and Suffolk counties with last year's 12 reported cases of West Nile virus, both county

health departments say they don't foresee the warmer winter resulting in a stronger breeding ground for the insects.

"There are so many other factors that affect the mosquito population," said Grace Kelly-McGovern, spokeswoman for the Suffolk's health department. "The temperature of the water, the moon tides, it's very unpredictable."

Officials for both county health departments say for now, there will be no major change to the mosquito monitoring process that starts in May. "What we can tell our residents is to make sure to report any sightings or issues," said Mary Ellen Laurain, spokeswoman for the Nassau County Health Department.

Pollen / Allergies

Seasonal allergy sufferers will likely be sneezing and dealing with watery eyes a few weeks earlier than in previous years.

That's because plants may be pollinating sooner due to the earlier springlike weather, said Scott A. Mori, a leading pollination expert with the New York Botanical Gardens.

Already, area doctors are reporting an uptick in patients reporting symptoms, which usually aren't triggered until next month.

"Depending on the rainfall this spring, the season should



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start to taper off by mid-June, but it's shaping up to be a more prolonged season," said Dr. Bruce Edwards, an allergy specialist based in Plainview.

Water Quality

If the past is any indication, the warmer winter may lead to a larger spread of algal blooms commonly referred to as red and brown tide, said Chris Gobler, an associate professor at Stony Brook's School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences.

"When it's been warmer in the spring, like 2008 and 2010, we've had red tide emerge earlier," Gobler said. "It can also be more intense like in 2008, which lead to large shellfish bed closures earlier."

Gobler said North Shore areas like Huntington and Northport will be more susceptible to red tide, while Great South Bay on the South Shore will be more prone to brown tide.

"This could have a negative impact on those who make their livelihood harvesting shellfish," Gobler said.

Theresa Hattenrath - Lehmann takes water samples from Northport Harbor for a study.



NEWSDAY PHOTO / THOMAS A. FERRARA

Beach Erosion



FILE PHOTO BY JOSEPH D. SULLIVAN

MARCH 2010

Smith Point Park in Mastic Beach

MARCH 2012

PHOTO BY JOSEPH D. SULLIVAN

With fewer winter storms to stir up wind gusts and waves, Long Island's shoreline received a much-needed reprieve, experts and officials said.

"They're in better shape going into the spring and summer," said Henry Bokuniewicz, a professor at Stony Brook University's School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences. "There's less of a crisis situation. The beaches have not been subject to as much stress as they have in years past."

The break from a long winter beating was welcome news at beaches like Smith Point County Park in Suffolk and portions of Robert Moses State Park

still recovering from last year's brutal storms.

"Generally the good winter has helped, but we weren't in great shape to begin with," said Emily Lauri, spokeswoman for the Suffolk County Parks Department.

At Robert Moses State Park, public access to portions of the beach's eastern end may be restricted this summer to allow for a longer recovery period, said George Gorman, deputy regional director for Long Island state parks.

"Overall, it was absolutely a positive thing that we didn't see major erosion storms during the winter," Gorman said.