

## About Trees: They might look dormant, but the action is underground

By Fred Morgan

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Most days now, we walk outside and look up at bare limbs and branches being whipped around by the winds under frequently wet and heavy gray skies.

Sometimes, it can be almost enough to make us want to crawl into bed and pull the covers back up until April.

But I can take some solace in remembering that with Mother Nature things aren't always what they seem.

We often think of the winter as the "dark months," when our trees are dormant. And when we think of dormant we think of synonyms like inactive, or to use two anthropomorphic metaphors, even unconscious or comatose.

That could not be further from the truth.

I remember a science fiction movie some years back in which the protagonist was able to shrink himself and travel through the blood vessels and arteries of a human body. If you could somehow shrink yourself like that and burrow into the ground around and under your favorite oak, you would be absolutely amazed at the activity that is going on down there. You'd find that your tree's activity has not ceased at all, but only shifted downward.

In temperate climate zones like ours, where the soil temperature seldom slips below 40 degrees, our soils play host to a virtual symphony of preparatory activity that comes to a subterranean crescendo in the fall and winter. It's in those cold, gray months that sugar energy formerly stored in woody tissue as carbohydrate is diverted downward to grow and extend the new roots that will support the coming year's explosion of green.

It's also in the fall and winter that mycorrhizal spores join with, multiply the mass of and work in union with tiny roots to prepare for increased water absorption and mineral conversion that will soon become necessary for growth topside.

In fact, that topside phenomenon of new color that we so look forward to could not be sustained at all were it not for this preparation.

And here in the Mid-South that's also exactly why fall is the best time to plant. It

provides a valuable preparatory period during which new transplants can begin to establish before sugar energy is reallocated back to the top to put on new leaf and growth in the spring.

So next time you step outside your door in winter, think instead of all that's going on under your feet and take heart. As Martha Stewart might say, it's "a good thing." It is in fact a down payment on and a silent promise of green things to come.

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