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## Tree roots grow during winter

By Fred Morgan

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The long winter days ahead are a time of preparation and restoration for our trees.

The bare branches of winter in the Mid-South seem to preclude any promise of the return of green life.

But in fact, the exact opposite is true. If we could shrink ourselves down to see the preparations under way inside the roots, we might be amazed.

When the soil temperature remains above about 40 degrees, as it does in our area over most winter seasons, the roots of our trees and plants continue to grow and expand right on through those cold days and weeks in preparation for the coming spring season.

That's exactly why fall is the best time to plant a tree here. It offers a head start for the new transplant, a time to get a grip in the soil before sugar energy has to be expended to put on new green leaves.

Fall and winter are the seasons of the roots.

This year, because of well-timed temperatures and rainfall, we have enjoyed an exceptionally colorful fall.

The shortened days and diminished light triggered the shutdown of the leaves' chloroplasts and put on display the color that had been hiding there.

Functionally, the trees' focus then shifts from the manufacture of sugar energy in the leaves to sugar use in the form of root hair growth in the relatively warm soil.

Tiny root hairs, those non-woody, little blond filaments that can hide in a spade of dirt, are the unseen critical parts that will be the new procurers of moisture and minerals from the soil during the next growing season.

In that sense, a tree is never really dormant.

So as I stare out into the drizzle, tempted to bemoan that coming "dormancy" of

December, January and February, I can be encouraged in the assurance of the work going on without pause in the ground beneath my feet.

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