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Mar. 25, 2013

March 25 — Calendars declare the start of spring, but experts say the wintry weather has consumers holding off on shopping for a new outdoor grill or putting a fresh coat of paint on their homes.

Unrelenting snow and lingering cold temperatures have delayed the start of the busy season for landscapers, roofers and others who benefited from an unusually warm March last year.

For a small, seasonal business, every week counts, and cold weather makes an impact, said Ray Vargo, director of the University of Pittsburgh Small Business Development Center.

“Their season’s getting smaller and smaller with each week,” Vargo said. “Their opportunity for generating sales is getting smaller and smaller because they can’t go backward. ... We’re condensing everything because of this poor weather.”

A year ago, the temperature reached 80 degrees. But this month, the high temperature has been stuck in the 30s and snow keeps falling. Business is “slower than molasses” at Hempfield-based Wolfe Nursery, owner Don Wolfe said.

“People don’t want to work in their yards when it’s this cold, so it’s definitely affecting us,” he said.

The nursery grows trees, shrubs and perennials and sells retaining wall stone, pavers and outdoor fireplaces.

“We would normally have a lot more trees at this time of the year. And we don’t

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50.6 inches.

When will it feel like spring?

“According to the forecast, not in the foreseeable future,” Darnley said last week. “We have this storm moving in through the beginning of next week. It doesn’t look like spring ’til maybe early April.”

The snow has been somewhat of a blessing for Steel City Landscape Inc., which does snow removal in winter months.

“It’s kind of a double-edged sword for us,” said Mark Purcell, company president. “It’s hurting us on the landscaping side, but we’re making up for it on the snow removal side.”

The Pittsburgh-based company typically has 10 crews out landscaping and maintaining lawns during the spring, but some crews spent Friday preparing trucks for the anticipated weekend snowstorm.

“As far as the landscaping aspect, the calls are down right now because people aren’t thinking of the outside,” Purcell said. “They’re still in wintertime mode. But if we have a day next week where it’s 60 and sunny, we’ll get bombarded.”

That winter mentality has reduced foot traffic in retail stores, according to one expert. Planalytics, based in Philadelphia, uses weather data to determine sales opportunities and risks.

“People are buying and doing things that are more winter still than spring,” said Evan Gold, senior vice president of client services.

In Pittsburgh, sales of allergy medicine are down 25 percent, sandal sales are off 36 percent and exterior paint purchases have fallen 54 percent compared with March

2012, Gold said.

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“Last year we were able to work the whole way through,” said Denny Bowen, owner of the Hempfield business. “This year, we had to shut down because of the snow.”

Roofers can hang gutters in cold weather, he said. But for roof repairs and installation, optimal weather is sunshine and temperatures above 40 degrees.

“As long as the shingles are pliable enough (and) they're not frozen,” roofs can be installed, Bowen said. “I'm waiting for the thaw.”

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