

# False spring damage on temperate tree seedlings is amplified with winter warming

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## Introduction

1. The timing of spring in temperate deciduous forests shapes plant and animal communities and influences ecosystem services from agriculture to carbon sequestration to forest management.
  - (a) With warming temperatures in the Northern Hemisphere, spring phenology (i.e., budburst and leafout) is advancing.
  - (b) As budburst and leafout are strongly cued by temperature, species' ranges and growing season lengths are highly susceptible to change with climate-induced warming (Chuine *et al.*, 2001).
  - (c) These advancements in spring phenology is leading to increased carbon uptake across temperate forests, which are essential carbon sinks that combat the negative effects of climate change (Keenan *et al.*, 2014).
2. And though the Northern Hemisphere is getting warmer, climate change is affecting general temperature trends but extreme weather events (e.g., polar vortexes) are still occurring.
  - (a) These weather events can in turn have big impacts on plant development each spring.
  - (b) One such event is known as a 'false spring', which is when temperatures drop below freezing (Schwartz *et al.*, 2002, i.e., below -2.2°C) after budburst has initiated.
  - (c) During budburst, it is a risky time for plants (Chamberlain *et al.*, 2019) and plants can sustain major damage if a freeze hits during this time.

- (d) It has been reported that it can take up to 16-38 days for plants to re-leaf after leaf loss from a false spring (Augspurger, 2009, 2013; Gu *et al.*, 2008; Menzel *et al.*, 2015).
  - (e) Such damage can have cascading effects to pollinators (Boggs & Inouye, 2012; Pardee *et al.*, 2017), nutrient cycling and carbon uptake as well as forest recruitment (Hufkens *et al.*, 2012; Klosterman *et al.*, 2018; Richardson *et al.*, 2013)
  - (f) Further, if a false spring occurs and damages a plant, that plant is at an increased risk of experiencing an additional false spring as freezing temperatures can slow the rate of budburst (Augspurger, 2009) resulting in even greater repercussions for the ecosystem.
  - (g) False springs are predicted to increase in certain regions as climate change progresses, thus understanding the impacts of false springs on forests is essential for forest management strategies and climate forecasting (Kral-O'Brien *et al.*, 2019).
3. False springs are not the only things that may complicate forecasts.
- (a) Winters are warming, which could potentially impact not only phenology but also growth.
  - (b) Warmer winters directly impact one of the three major cues plants use to time budburst: (1) over-winter cold temperatures (chilling), (2) warming spring temperatures (forcing) and (3) longer daylengths (photoperiod).
  - (c) Due to harsh winters and unpredictable springs, temperate tree and shrub species have evolved to use a two-phase sequence of dormancy.
  - (d) The first phase—endodormancy—is the period of winter when temperate trees are inhibited from growing, regardless of the outdoor environment and individuals require a certain number of chilling hours to exit this initial phase (Charrier *et al.*, 2011).
  - (e) The second phase—ecodormancy—begins after the chilling requirement has been met and is the period of time when growth can occur but the external environment is not conducive to growth (e.g. too cold) (Basler & Körner, 2012).
  - (f) With endo- and ecodormancy phases, temperate plants are better protected against stochastic warm spells in the winter and reduce the risk of a false spring (Basler & Körner, 2014) but climate change complicates the timing and depth of dormancy (Charrier *et al.*, 2011).
4. Winter warming and its effect on dormancy could impact the quality of budburst (Cleland *et al.*, 2007; Bonhomme *et al.*, 2009).
- (a) Decreases in chilling temperatures from climate change could affect budburst timing (Nanninga, Claudia and Buyarski, Chris R and Pretorius, Andrew M and Montgomery, Rebecca A, 2017), as

well as the synchrony of budburst within a population or even within an individual (Sanz-Pérez, V. and Castro-Díez, P. and Valladares, F., 2009).

- (b) And, reduced chilling—especially if there are fewer cold nights with warming—could impact a plant’s tolerance of freezing temperatures throughout the winter (Charrier *et al.*, 2011).
  - (c) With decreased freezing tolerance, plants are susceptible to damage to leaf tissue, canopy dieback, xylem embolism and injury to the shoot apical meristem, all of which could greatly reduce a plant’s ability to recover for the remainder of the growing season or even survive until the next season (Sakai & Larcher, 1987; Gu *et al.*, 2008).
  - (d) Thus, understanding the interplay of warming winters and false spring risk is critical for understanding how temperate forests will change in the future.
5. Temperate tree and shrub species respond to the three phenological cues in varying ways to reach budburst.
- (a) Ideally, individuals would evolve to require high levels of chilling to delay budburst and ultimately diminish false spring risk but competition for nutrients, water and light resources in the early spring pushes individuals to leafout earlier.
  - (b) Plants use myriad strategies to minimize false spring risk but maximize growth.
  - (c) As freezing tolerance in a plant steadily decreases after budburst begins until the leaf is fully unfolded (Lenz *et al.*, 2016), some species avoid false spring risk by employing mechanisms to speed through this high risk timeframe.
  - (d) Other species use trichomes or high solute concentrations in the leaves to increase freezing tolerance during budburst (Agrawal *et al.*, 2004; Sakai & Larcher, 1987), while still other species have high chilling, forcing and/or photoperiod requirements and leafout late in the spring to avoid damage from false springs altogether.
6. Young trees and understory species generally initiate budburst before the canopy trees to benefit from higher light levels (Augspurger, 2008; Vitasse *et al.*, 2013), which potentially puts these species and individuals at higher risk of freeze damage (Vitasse *et al.*, 2014).
- (a) Species typically leafout in a similar sequence, with understory species leafing out earlier and higher canopy trees leafing out last but many studies are predicting substantial shifts in chronological order and reassembly of species’ leafout with climate change (Roberts *et al.*, 2015; Laube *et al.*, 2013).
  - (b) As warming alters winter temperatures and false spring prevalence, phenological cues and their interactions are anticipated to change, which could greatly alter competition among forest species

for early season resources and ultimately impact species diversity and carbon uptake in temperate forests.

7. Here, we assessed the effects of over-winter chilling length and false springs on seedling phenology and growth across eight temperate tree and shrub species.
  - (a) Individuals were exposed to three levels of over-winter chilling.
  - (b) Once budburst was initiated, half of the individuals were exposed to freezing temperatures at  $-3^{\circ}\text{C}$  to mimic a false spring event.
  - (c) Individuals were then put in a greenhouse for the remainder of the growing season to ask: (1) How does the accumulation of over-winter chilling hours and (2) how do false spring events impact phenology, physical leaf characteristics and growth?

## Methods

### Plant Selection and Material

1. We chose 10 temperate woody plant tree and shrub species with varying phenologies, that were not used as crops or ornamental species: *Acer saccharinum* L., *Alnus incana rugosa* L., *Betula papyrifera* Marsh., *Betula populifolia* Marsh., *Cornus racemosa* Lam., *Fagus grandifolia* Ehrh., *Nyssa sylvatica* Marsh., *Salix purpurea* L., *Sorbus americana* Marsh., and *Viburnum dentatum* L.
  - (a) We received 48 dormant bare root seedlings—each measuring 6-12 inches—for each species from Cold Stream Farm LLC (Freesoil, MI;  $44^{\circ}6' \text{ N}$  - $86^{\circ}12' \text{ W}$ ) for a total of 480 individuals.
  - (b) Upon receipt, plants were potted in POT INFO AND SOIL INFO HERE!! and placed in growth chambers at the Weld Hill Research Building of the Arnold Arboretum (Boston, MA;  $42^{\circ}17' \text{ N}$  - $71^{\circ}8' \text{ W}$ ) at  $4^{\circ}\text{C}$  to maintain dormancy.
  - (c) Two species—*Fagus grandifolia* and *Nyssa sylvatica*—were delivered as root cuttings rather than seedlings and had to be removed from the experiment resulting in eight total species and 384 individuals.
  - (d) After all individuals had leafed out, all seedlings were up-potted to new pots (NEW POT SIZE HERE) and given fertilizer (FERTILIZER INFO HERE).

## Growth Chamber and Greenhouse Conditions

1. Individuals were randomly selected and placed in six experimental treatments: 4 weeks of chilling at 4°C x no false spring, 4 weeks of chilling at 4°C x false spring, 6 weeks of chilling at 4°C x no false spring, 6 weeks of chilling at 4°C x false spring, 8 weeks of chilling at 4°C x no false spring, 8 weeks of chilling at 4°C x false spring.
  - (a) While individuals were in the growth chamber under chilling conditions, photoperiod was maintained at eight hour days.
  - (b) Lighting within the chambers was provided through a combination of T5HO fluorescent lamps with halogen incandescent bulbs at roughly  $250 \mu\text{mol}/\text{m}^2/\text{s}$ .
  - (c) Individuals were rotated within and among growth chambers every two weeks to eliminate possible growth chamber effects.
2. Once chilling was completed, individuals were moved to a greenhouse with mean daytime temperature of 15°C and a mean nighttime temperature of 10°C.
  - (a) Photoperiod was set to 12 hour days throughout the spring until all individuals reached full leaf expansion.
  - (b) After all individuals reached full leaf expansion, greenhouse temperatures and photoperiods were kept ambient (see Supplemental Materials for more information).

## Phenology and False Spring Treatment

1. Phenology observations were taken every 2-3 days through full leaf expansion and then recorded weekly over the summer.
  - (a) Budburst was denoted as BBCH stage 07, which is ‘beginning of sprouting or bud breaking’ and monitored until full leaf expansion (BBCH stage 19) in order to evaluate the duration of vegetative risk for each individual (Finn *et al.*, 2007).
  - (b) For the individuals under the ‘false spring treatment’, once at least 50% of the buds were at BBCH stage 07 but the individual had not yet reached BBCH stage 19, they were placed in a growth chamber set to mimic a false spring event.
  - (c) Individuals receiving the false spring treatment were placed in a growth chamber for 14 hours, starting at 6pm.

- (d) Temperatures in the growth chamber were ramped down: 6pm to 10°C, 8pm to 5°C, 10pm to 0°C, 12am to -3°C, 3am to 0°C, 4am to 5°C, 6am to 10°C and 8am temperatures rose again to 15°C (Figure

## Results

- i. False springs and chilling durations impacted individual phenology but not phenological rank within the community.
  - A. Order of leafout timing was consistent across all treatments, with *Salix purpurea* always being first to leafout, followed by *Betula papyrifera*, *B. populifolia* and *Cornus racemosa* and finally by *Alnus rugosa*, *Sorbus americana*, *Viburnum dentatum* and *Acer saccharinum* (Figure 1).
  - B. *Viburnum dentatum* was the only species to change rank across treatments, though it consistently was grouped with the later-leafout group of species.
  - C. Order of budset timing was also consistent across all treatments, with *Cornus racemosa* and *Sorbus americana* being first to set bud, followed by *Betula papyrifera* and *Acer saccharinum* and finally by *Viburnum dentatum*, *B. populifolia*, *Salix purpurea* and *Alnus rugosa* (Figure
  - D. False springs affected physical leaf traits.
  - E. Leaf chlorophyll content decreased under false spring conditions, especially in the six weeks ( $-1.45 \pm 1.16$ ) and eight weeks ( $-2.03 \pm 1.07$ ) Figure
  - F. False springs impacted growth.
  - G. Across all chilling treatments, individuals exposed to false springs experienced more damage to the shoot apical meristem ( $2.07 \pm 0.97$  for four weeks,  $1.33 \pm 1.42$  for six weeks and  $2.17 \pm 1.31$  for eight weeks), Figure 4a) and Table

## Discussion

- H. Growth chamber studies and climate model projections predict substantial shifts in species leafout order under climate change conditions (Roberts *et al.*, 2015; Laube *et al.*, 2013), other studies using long-term phenology observations suggest leafout phenology order is consistent across years (Wesołowski, Tomasz and Rowiński, Patryk, 2006).
- I. We are not seeing major shifts in species leafout order except for in *Viburnum dentatum*, which still leafs out within the later cohort of species across all treatments.

- J. Therefore, we do not predict major reassembly of forest communities due to winter warming or false spring incidence.
- K. Chilling length greatly influences spring phenology and can compensate for the detrimental effects of false springs.
- L. False springs increase the duration of vegetive risk, leading to an increased risk in multiple false spring risks in one season.
- M. But chilling can compensate for this increase in duration of vegetative risk: if the chilling requirement is met, the rate of budburst does not increase with a false spring event.
- N. This suggests chilling is more important for seedlings in terms of exposure to multiple false springs.
- O. With climate change and warming temperatures, over-winter chilling is anticipated to decrease and false springs are predicted to increase in certain regions.
- P. This combination could greatly impact plant performance, survival and shape species distributions, ultimately affecting crucial processes such as carbon uptake and nutrient cycling.
- Q. False springs greatly impact the physical characteristics of the leaf.
- R. With chlorophyll content, leaf toughness and leaf thickness decreasing, the quality of the leaf dwindles.
- S. This reduction in quality could subsequently lead to an increase in herbivory risk (?).
- T. Further studies that assess the secondary compounds and total phenolic content (Ayres, 1993; Webber & Mason, 2016) of the leaves exposed to false springs are needed to better understand the level of herbivory risk.
- U. With sufficient chilling, false springs are less damaging to seedling growth.
- V. However, false springs consistently impair shoot apical meristem growth, which can lead to reliance on lateral shoot growth, rendering inefficient growth patterns.
- W. Shoot apical meristem damage—if significant within a stand—can lead to declines in recruitment (Rhodes & Clair], 2018).
- X. Understanding the impacts of false springs coupled with reduced over-winter chilling is essential for forecasting.
- Y. Our findings have large implications for forest recruitment.
- Z. With over-winter chilling decreasing with climate change, seedlings are more at risk of sustaining damage from false spring events.
- . Understanding recruitment and inter- and intraspecific competition with false springs is crucial.

. If individuals that initiate budburst earlier are more at risk of false spring exposure, this could lead to dieback of early-budbursting species in temperate forests with climate change.

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## Tables and Figures

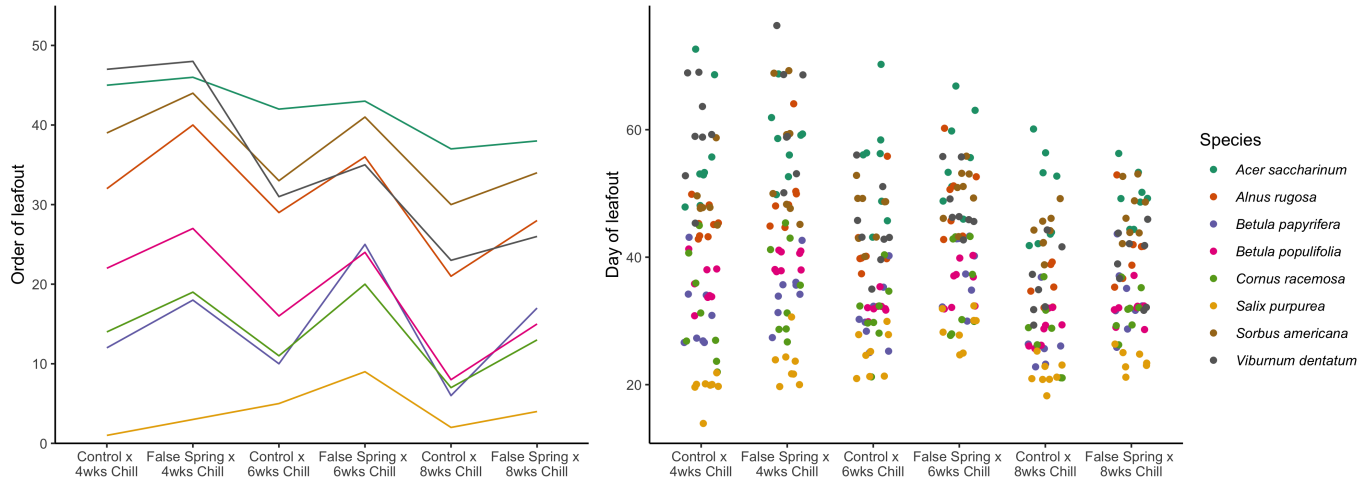


Figure 1: Understanding rank order of leafout across all species using (a) mean trends and (b) raw estimates.

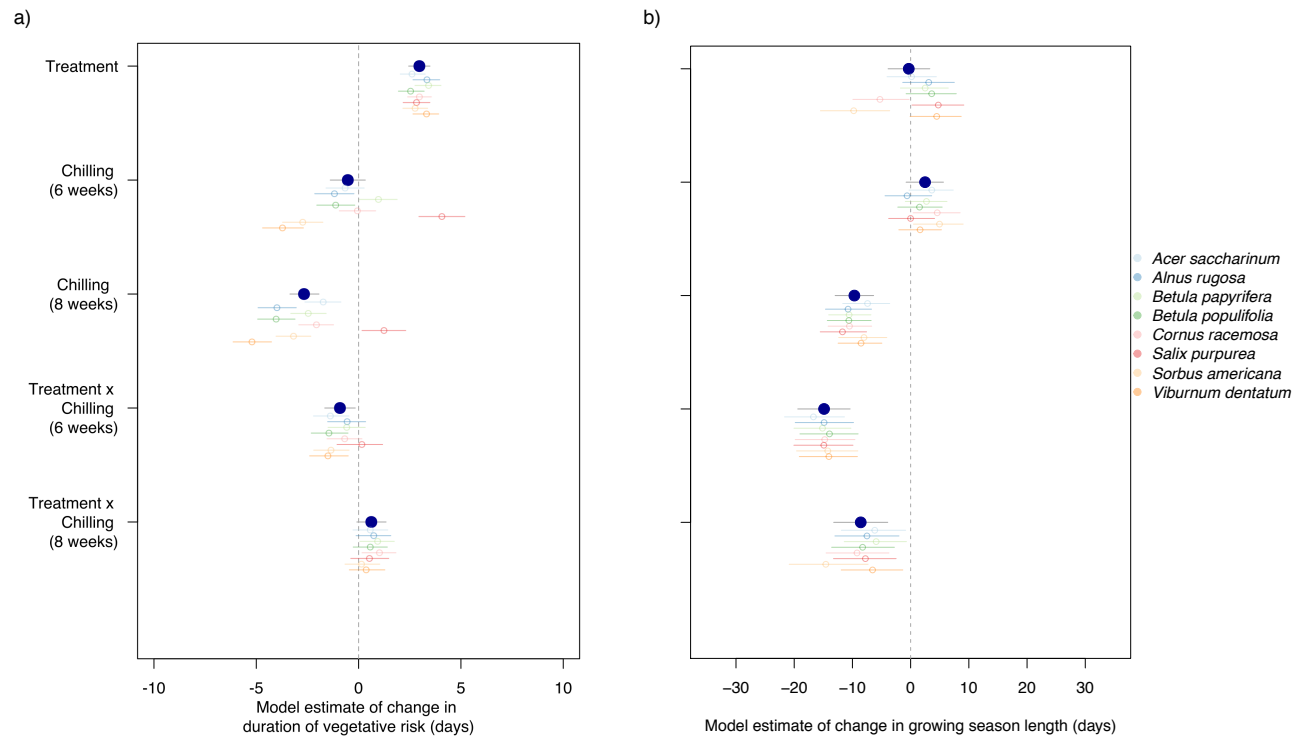


Figure 2: Effects of false spring treatment, six weeks of chilling and eight weeks of chilling on a) duration of vegetative risk and b) growing season length. Dots and lines show means and 50% uncertainty intervals.

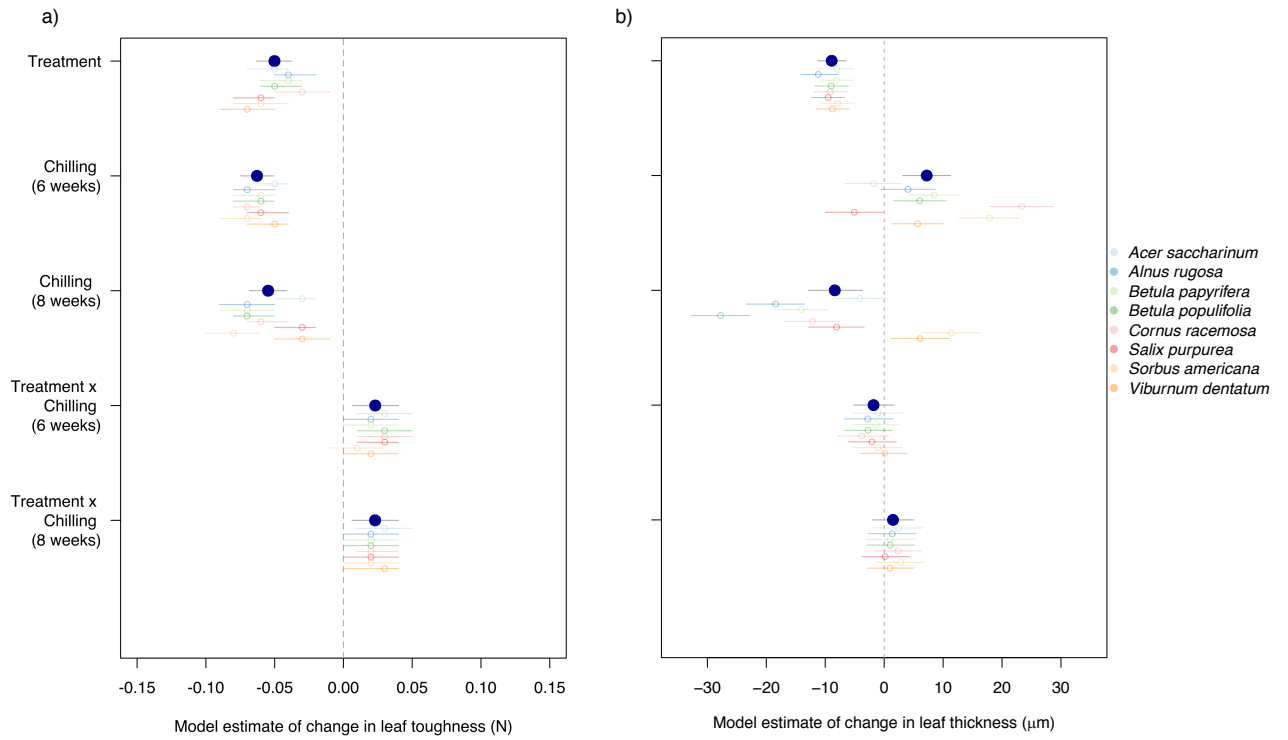


Figure 3: Effects of false spring treatment, six weeks of chilling and eight weeks of chilling on a) leaf toughness and b) leaf thickness. Dots and lines show means and 50% uncertainty intervals.

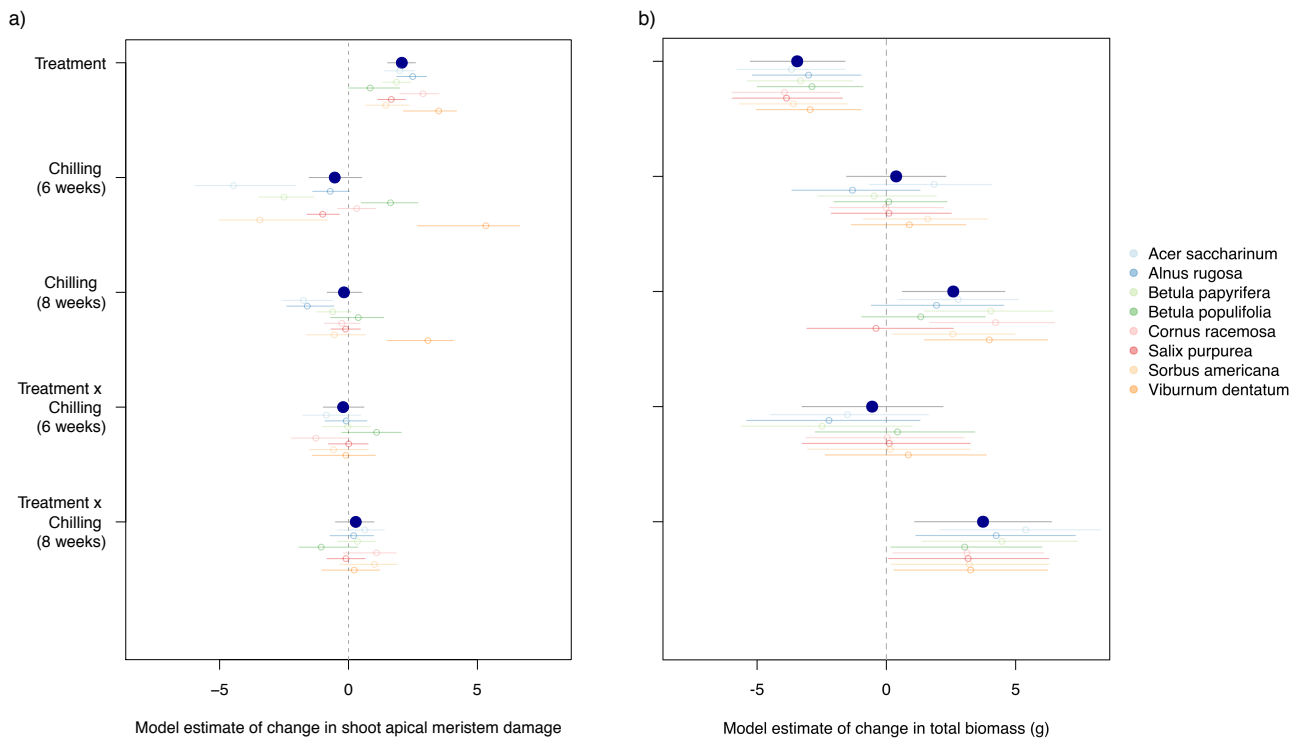


Figure 4: Effects of false spring treatment, six weeks of chilling and eight weeks of chilling on a) shoot apical meristem damage and b) total biomass. Dots and lines show means and 50% uncertainty intervals.