

DIG THIS for 8-20-08 - What's a Gardener to Do With This Weather? © 2008

This has been the strangest gardening year that I can remember. But, at my age, there are many things I can't remember, and many things I think are strange. Maybe we have had more unusual years than this after all. If the phone calls and visits we've had to the Extension Office Master Gardener Clinic are any indication though, it has absolutely been a strange gardening year.

For example, plants that usually bloom in June bloomed in April. Plants that usually bloomed in April bloomed in June. And the saga went on and on. Blackberries are ripening already in some areas. More deciduous trees than normal are changing color already. We've had out of season frost, hail storms, fog, steamy heat and unseasonable lows and highs. What's a gardener to do?

But we gardeners are an optimistic lot. When plants die we turn them into rich dark soil nourishing compost. We may have an abundance of compost this year in some of our gardens. Dead or dying woody plants can be chipped and shredded to make mulch. That's a good thing.

Veggies such as spinach, carrots, beans, lettuce and radishes (to name a few) can be planted several times during the year. August is also the perfect month to plant winter harvested veggies such as swiss chard, broccoli raab, arugula, kale and garlic. These plants like our cooler, rainy fall and winters.

But, what about now? Yeah, what about now? All I can say is, "It's very frustrating for gardeners in many areas of our 38 micro-climate county." I usually grow cherry tomatoes in a huge container up against the wall of our house facing southwest. The heat from the house, the sun and the roof overhang usually create the perfect climate for growing sweet one millions and sungold cherry tomatoes my husband and I eat like candy. Usually these beauties ripen in early to mid July. This year, so far, the tomatoes are small and green b-b size and others are only about 1/2 inch across also green. I'm thinking they'll never ripen. They look very healthy, but continue to remain a bright lovely color of green. Not very appetizing when you're used to deliciously sweet and tasty red and gold cherry tomatoes popped right into your mouth, morning, noon and evening.

Grapes take as much heat and sun as possible so it's always been a challenge here, unless we choose those grapes with the shortest growing season. This year we've received reports that area gardeners' grapes are very slow to ripen. Many of the fruit trees missed their window of opportunity for being pollinated. We'd have one very warm day and then a brutal cold snap. The poor bees, even the orchard mason bees and bumble bees weren't able to get all the fruit pollinated this year.

We've all heard of vegetables bolting and going to seed when the weather got too hot for too long, but this past year veggies were bolting and setting seed when it went from warm to cold too often and too rapidly. Gardeners even had trouble growing our old standbys - beets, lettuce and spinach.

The moral, dear gardeners, of this sad tale of woe, is "Don't despair." Truly, each season brings new adventures for gardeners. Luckily for all of us, when we have a not so good year for gardening, the next year usually brings wonderfully delightful weather and abundant crops. Let's hope that adage holds true. In the meantime, uphold your gardener's optimism and get out there and plant a few late producing crops.