



THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS

13 September 2007

Television weather forecasters appear to believe, when they are not busy prophesying doom for the 11 o'clock news, that they have an audience composed almost entirely of picnickers. Everybody wants a sunny day every day, and gosh they wish they could oblige. Nothing would make them more chipper. Unfortunately, every now and then the isobars align in contrary ways and the forecasters have, abashedly, to give folks the bad news that the models are predicting plain old rain in the offing. It is a bummer to have to spoil people's carefree outdoor plans and not even be able to offer them the consolation of a little thrilling violent weather.

To be fair, nobody can really object to a day of lovely weather. Well, nobody but a farmer. Not that farmers mind any one day of sunshine, warmth and gentle breezes. We may be an odd lot, but we are human. We feel the same surge of good spirits at the appearance of the sun, the same burst of energy on pleasantly warm spring days, the same desire to lie back in the grass on an August afternoon and watch the puffy clouds slowly transform themselves against a deep blue backdrop as any normal human beings. Come to think of it, we farmers won't complain about two or three or even seven days in row of "good" weather. We just don't want every day to be like that. We prefer a little variety in the weather.

Or, more to the point, our crops do. Like us, they appreciate warmth and sunshine. In fact, they appreciate it more than we do. Given their nifty, seemingly effortless trick of turning photons into food, they rather count on seeing the sun. We may grouse about too many cloudy days, but our sulk is nothing compared to that of a tomato vine or strawberry plant in the shade. We can talk of seasonal affective disorder, but an Eskimo will take to his igloo for the dark season and survive until spring. Not cheerily, I would guess. It would too much to ask someone to remain upbeat on a diet of raw seal in a small tent made of ice (what possessed any humans to stay behind in the arctic instead of walking on to warmer climates is an anthropological mystery). But he does survive. A plant would have no chance.

Nor, however, would our crops have much chance if all we had were sunny days. Our socks might last longer in an arid climate, but the vegetables would not. Without the rainy days we would have nothing to pick. I suppose all the rain could fall at night and every day could be sunny. But I have been asking everyone I know to arrange for this for fourteen years and nobody shows any sign of working it out. So until someone does we need those rainy days.

Ideally, most vegetable crops would get an inch of water a week (actual needs vary somewhat depending on an array of factors such as air and soil temperature, the soil's moisture holding capacity, the depth of the topsoil, the size of the plant—leaves and roots—and wind). That means an inch that actually soaks into the soil. Much of an inch of rain delivered in a hurry a thunderstorm will run right across the surface of our fields and disappear into the drainage ditches (taking a lot of top soil with it) or create huge puddles in which the crops can drown. A steady rain does the plants a lot more good.

Not that we get days of steady rain because the weather has some interest in helping our crops. My years of farming have convinced me that if the weather has any intentions they are considerably less hospitable. We get rainy days—and sunny ones and thunderstorms and sleet and tornadoes and droughts—because that is how the weather works on this planet. And everything living has to learn to live with that, even if it means canceling a picnic every now and then.

Of course, we would have to cancel a lot more picnics if it never rained again because we would have a lot less to eat. Rain may be an annoyance for many, but it is both unavoidable and necessary. It seems to me weather forecasters might acknowledge that every now and then. The

This week's share: Shell beans, Dandelion, Eggplant, Escarole, Lettuce, Peppers, Hot peppers, Potatoes, Tomatoes, Acorn winter squash, Basil, Cilantro

occasional reminder to the general population that the planet has its own habits regardless of our desires and that we are in any number of ways connected to those habits would prove salutary. Certainly our current inclination the regard earth as something promising but petulant to be bent to our will is not proving entirely productive.

I doubt, however, that this will happen. Television does not thrive on nuance and complication. It thrives on advertising and advertising is about perfect picnics, not rainy days. Plus it is paid for by the sorts of corporations that tend to figure they can deal with bad weather in one place by producing what they need in another (including, I guess, another planet once they have helped muck up this one). So a little reminder during the news that a rainy day may do you some good as well as upsetting your outdoor plans your is unlikely to be forthcoming.

Well, you may not have heard it on television, but the rain this week did your food some good. Not that every crop needed rain. The peppers, for instance, have obviously enjoyed the dry season. We have never picked this many red peppers before. In fact, we may be picking more red peppers each week than we have picked in the previous twelve years combined. The eggplants have enjoyed the conditions, too, and we finally had a good (good for this farm, anyway) winter squash harvest.

But lots of the late crops—the roots and greens that make up much of the share for the last month of the season—were straining to survive. This is when the fall roots size up and they need water to do that. But they were getting barely enough moisture to grow new leaves and the bugs were starting to ravage their foliage, which only set them back further. And so while the forecasters exulted over the perfect picnic weather, the crops languished and our well ran dry.

I won't go so far as to say we enjoyed working outside in the rain on Monday and Tuesday. No matter how grateful you are for steady rain, wearing wet socks all morning is no picnic. Still, it was just a minor discomfort. A pair of dry socks and the sight of revived crops helped us get over it quickly.

Having spent all this time praising rainy days, I feel a little bad saying this, but I hope we have a lovely, warm fall day on October 7th. That is the date for our fall Open House. Yes, I know, I told you months ago that we would have the Open House on September 30th. I was quite pleased with this rare moment of organization on my part, but I should have known to distrust it. I should also have known that my mother's 70th birthday is that weekend. At least I have remembered to tell you about the change now, early enough I hope for at least some of you to fit an October farm visit into your schedule. On the bright side, it gives you another week to perfect your recipe for the pie contest. I will send out further details soon. But I can tell you right now that we have the event rain or shine.