

# God is My Co-Pruner (Garden Time in Vernonia): Crappy Climate

By Tom Coughlin

The Longest Night is behind us. For now. The thrushes have pecked all the medlar's golden orbs back to bare branches. A lot of Honesty is hanging in tatters, and the Chinese lanterns have rotted down to their skeinskin cages, a bright orange marble enclosed in each. Lichen glows on the branches, but overall, the yard's looking a little dismal. It's all increasing photons from here to June, though. So we can hope. Let's hear it for the Returning Sun, for Invictus Sol.

Like a lot of fresh-faced, first time gardeners, early on we tried growing the charismatic megafloora we all dream of eating from our own patch out back---tomatoes, corn and cantaloupes, for instance. Took a long time to admit defeat in large part because it was years before I calmly sat down and timed the number of hours that shone on the beds we hoped to grow in. Not a cheerful tally. Even worse was I realized the sun sank in the sky as the Summer progressed.

That's a somewhat shameful thing to admit for someone purportedly interested in green-thumbery. After all, isn't that what it means for the Year to turn Fall? Astrophysics is one thing in the mind, but it's another to see a shadow creeping its way weekly up a bed of something you've already been coddling for months. You're counting on those warm rays to ripen your efforts, but instead the sun slips slowly below the tree line, leaving your once leafy lovelies to limp along chlorotically until you're lucky to get even a stunted version of the picture in the seed catalog before it sprouts shiny black hairs and turns to mush.

Of all the obstacles we'd face and I was too stupid to discern the importance of, shade was probably the most basic and the least surmountable. Even so, we've managed a modest pleasure garden, not nearly enough to line our larder with, but enough to give us many meals and many evenings of snacking out in the yard. In part we've done this by lowering our expectations and in part by raising our soil's fertility.

To the naturally Green-Thumbed, this will seem painfully obvious, but you need to fertilize. I once believed basic soil was good enough, that the less you messed with Nature, the better plants would flourish. I'm not sure what I was thinking, because, as it turns out, Nature messes with our soil by pouring forty-four inches of rain a year

through it, in the process leaching away a lot of what would make our soils nutrient dense. It's difficult to make compost strong enough to compensate for that rainfall and low light and so we need to add fertilizer to our soil when we prepare our beds and when we side-dress our plants throughout the growing season. At least we do here if we want much to happen.

The other thing has been to pick plants that can handle the low light, high rain profile. It helps to imagine what could grow in an even crappier climate than our own. We've certainly given up on corn and cantaloupes and have turned instead to the types of plants one might find in an Irish cottage garden.

A particularly light-starved Irish cottage garden.

So much depends on the size and siting of your yard. Long time readers of this column will recall I grew up in the Mediterranean climate of southern California. After moving to Hillsboro decades ago, my dad pretty quickly gave up on gardening because the Willamette Valley was too cold to grow the kinds of plants he was used to. He took up other rainproof hobbies, like ham radio. I hate to think what he would've done if we had moved to Vernonia, instead. Probably scrape the place clean and put in a go-cart track.


Last summer, wonderful as it was, there was more than one morning I talked to a friend in Dundee who, were it not for Weather Underground, probably wouldn't have believed how much chillier a day can start out here. "How can it be *thirty degrees* colder there?" (Italics

his). I don't really understand the factors that make that possible, but I've come to accept the result. My dad thought he had it bad living down there in the Banana Belt and, compared to SoCal, he did. Compared to Vernonia, though, he had it easy. Being as wise as I've become, I encourage myself sometimes by imagining some schlub in Siberia tending his tundra bed, dreaming of a steaming mug of lichen soup. A mind game blessing.

Though I've pretty much sworn them off, I bought two tomato plants last year, mostly to support our local gardening group. Japanese Black Trifele is a really attractive, mid-sized tomato we'd grown with some success before. I figured it'd at least be pretty. Isis Candy is a variety I'd been interested in for


some time, but hadn't been able to lay my hands on. Although there's probably no cultivar the NSA more closely has its eye on, the catalog copy hooked me---a rich, sweet, fruity cherry tomato with a cat's eye starburst on the blossom end. Again, at least it'd be pretty. Turns out we got plenty of tasty fruit, though they were grown in our sunniest spots during an unusually sunny summer, in soil liberally amended with Down To Earth's wonderful Bio-Fish 7-7-2 fertilizer. But that's what it takes.

The effort was so successful, in fact, that The Institute of the Exploding Mole is currently developing a line of Organic Vernonian Shade Grown Tomatoes. Look for them at a market stand near you this fall.



**Owned and Operated by  
Don & Kim Wallace**

**DON WALLACE, PLS**  
Professional Land Surveying  
1224 E. Alder St.  
Vernonia, OR 97064  
Phone: 503-429-6115  
FAX: 1-866-297-1402  
Email: DWallace\_KLS@msn.com




VERNONIA FRIENDSHIP  
**JAMBOREE**  
& LOGGING SHOW  
Est. 1957

**FUNDRAISER RAFFLE**  
SGP-QCB

**TICKETS ON SALE NOW AT:**  
Napa Auto Parts  
R&S Market  
True Value  
Vernonia Hardware

1 in 450 chance to win. Proceeds go towards Jamboree & Logging Show.  
Must be 18 years old to enter. Winner will be drawn on **May 1, 2015**.  
Winner must be able to pass firearms background check and will be notified by phone or email.

## Vernonia Computer Services

Computer problems? We can help.

- Hardware testing, repair, replacement
- Windows
- Software install/upgrade
- Virus/spyware removal
- Custom systems built
- Housecalls




**Bill Langmaid**  
(971) 998-3705  
bill@rangelights.com  
Available by appointment



**BANKS CHRISTIAN ACADEMY**  
Education for Eternity

Pre-Kindergarten through 9th Grade

- Excellent Education
- Small Class Size
- Affordable Tuition
- Frequent Field Trips
- Transportation Available

**503-324-4500**  
22785 NW Fisher Rd.  
Buxton, OR

Check us out on Facebook!

[www.bankschristianacademy.org](http://www.bankschristianacademy.org)