

Diggin' in the Dirt: Weather Whether or Not

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The OSU Extension Office is fully reopened. The best way to reach me directly is with the email below but calls are always welcome.

Oregon weather never ceases to surprise us

The long, cool weather pattern persisted through the early part of June. This slowed planting of many “warm-season” crops but also gave slugs that were stymied by last year’s heat and drought the moisture and nutritious, cool season spring crops they needed to repopulate (Joy of Joys).

The weather did emphasize the value of cold frames for early seed starting and protection from many cold spring days and nights, and the value of raised beds for direct planting early when regular garden soil was way too wet to till. I have talked to many people that were expecting another warm summer and had their transplants ready to go outside a month ago. Most of those starts will still do fine but having an extended fall will help Vernonia’s tomato and pepper crops mature.

I am looking more into the use of winter tarps on garden areas that will be spring tilled to both control weeds and maintain lower spring soil moisture. This practice has been adopted by an increasing number of small commercial produce and flower growers. There was some initial fear that the practice might damage the soil microbiology and/or affect earthworm activity. Research at Cornell and other universities indicate that isn’t the case. It certainly helped this year.

One unhappy note is the number of home orchards that have far less fruit set this year than normal. At higher elevations like Vernonia, low night temperatures combined with incessant rain and slow bee activity led to very poor pollination on many varieties and in many locations. Honeybee numbers were down, both in managed and “wild” hives. Cold weather played a role, extending the time honeybees had to rely on their own honey. Many ran short. In addition, the Varroa mite is continuing to take its toll on honeybees. Even the mason bees were slowed. There were two (at least) distinct cycles of emergence of last year’s brood. I think the “early riser” bumblebees are doing OK.



In the same vein, my prediction for yellow jacket and bald-faced hornet populations this summer is that it likely will be low again. Last year’s June extreme heat nailed them and they historically don’t do well in wet springs. So we shall see. Yellow jackets and especially bald-face hornets do eat a lot of caterpillars and other insects that may visit our vegetables. If only the ground-nesting yellow jackets weren’t so ornery, one could even get to appreciate their service.

A positive impact of so much rain is that stored soil moisture is much higher than it has been in years. It may help some mature western red cedars, which we have been losing at a remarkable pace due to low soil moisture, revive. This will also help newly planted Douglas fir trees and anything else you planted that you can’t water. Seedlings are still in short supply due to heavy harvesting activity (trees have to be replanted by Oregon law) and forest fire affected lands that also have to be replanted. Deer do enjoy nibbling on the young trees so **keep the leader protected** with a “bud cap” or a Vexar type tube, which have to be checked and re-set periodically due



to the humorous behavior of some deer and many elk. Some repellents can be applied in the spring to reduce browsing. Trade name products that are quite effective include Deer-Away, Plantskydd, Liquid Fence, and Bobbex. Repeat this process, either with the “smell” protection of the repellent or the physical leader protection of the tube or bud cap until the young conifer trees are “free to grow”. i.e. the leader is higher than the deer and elk can reach.

Thinning root and other crops

We thin seedling to allow enough space for the remaining plants to develop a good leaf canopy, collect sunlight, and turn that sunlight into the carbohydrates and tasty sugars and flavors that become the edible portion of the plant. Row spacing can make a difference with wider row spacing allowing closer “in-row” spacing after thinning. The earlier you thin, the less root disturbance there is to the remaining plants.

Here is what is used in most small vegetable farms for “in-row” root crop spacing: carrots = 2”; beets, onions, and parsnips = 3”; turnips = 4”; and rutabagas (a forgotten but wonderful winter storage vegetable) = 5-6”. Most of these spacing assume at least a 6-inch spacing between rows. That said, with carrots, the between row spacing can be 4”.

For other crops, pole beans are thinned to 4”, corn = 8-10” assuming a 30” between rows; small cabbage need about 16 inches in all directions but 30” if the large types; broccoli needs about 16”; peppers need about 18” in all directions and tomatoes do best with about 36” in all directions.

Take excess produce to the food bank, senior centers, or community meals programs. Cash donations to buy food are also greatly appreciated.

The Extension Service offers its programs and materials equally to all people.

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