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WEEKEND BREAK

THE DAILY ASTORIAN • FRIDAY, NOV. 3, 2017 • 1C



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Vine maple in the autumn light

A writer battens down the hatches before winter

By ED HUNT
For The Daily Astorian

Fall is a gamble in this corner of the Pacific Northwest.

You can find yourself as a punching bag for Pacific storms, one after another battering your ambitions with rain and wind, high water and downed trees.

Or you can have the best weather of the entire year: crystal blue skies and t-shirt temperatures among the yellowing golden alder and maple trees. Postcard days.

We don't enjoy the New England colors here, but I'll take our sharp red of vine maple in the autumn light. Watercolor sunsets spiced with the smell of woodsmoke as a hundred cozy fires come alight to fight the chill of the night.

You can't take anything for granted. You can only aspire to take it all in.

Such bright autumn days are blessings to be sure, appreciated so much more after an "atmospheric river" pounds us for a weekend, reminding us what lies ahead once winter truly comes ashore.

It seems a crime on these days to be inside. "Productive" is the word in my house. Getting things done that need to be done, battening down the hatches for winter, getting hay in the barn, deck furniture tied down or stored away.

To-do lists are longer on sunny fall days.

Through all of it, my wife, Amy, and I will stop at moments and look at each other and the cloudless blue above our heads and soak in the sunlight.

I have learned over the years to carve out time in my so-called "productivity" to appreciate the clear fall days. There is a feeling of guilt, to be sure, when I choose a lazy motorcycle ride through cascading yellow leaves rather than outdoor chores that need to be done. Yet a crisp autumn memory will keep you almost as warm on a dark December day as dry firewood. Almost.

Before the darkness comes

We are not fools, mind you — more ant than grasshopper after all these years.

We start early now, getting wood pellets and firewood in, filling the barn with hay, shoring up fences and putting things away.

We make hay while the sun shines — not just a maxim but a way of life in these parts — we make firewood, repair gutters, repair the outdoor lights before the darkness comes.

Often something will derail our day, our schedule wiped out by an unforeseen event. Equipment breaks down. Animals find a way to get sick or get into where they shouldn't be. We need to run to town to get this fixed, or to pick up another one



Ed Hunt photos

TOP: Vine maple trees along Grays River ABOVE: The old Burkhalter Dairy Barn in Grays River, with the Rosburg Bridge in the background BELOW: A kayak at sunset



of those.

So it goes.

"A pretty day for a drive at least," we say, and roll the windows down to enjoy the fresh air along the way.

While running errands in Astoria the other day, I met a man who said he'd just moved up from L.A. I smiled and gave the advice I usually dispense to newcomers.

I told him that after 25 years I've learned it can rain 100 days in a row here and be somehow different every day. Our coastal climate provides dynamic weather, ever-changing even when locked in shades of gray. There will be plenty enough days when you are soaked to the bone the minute you step outside. There are days when you'd rather just sit by the fire and watch the sheets of rain march across the horizon and cherish shafts of silver light when it slices through the clouds.

It rains from November to the end of June, but we get a few blue-sky days here and there — maybe a whole week strung together in February.

Through the rain, you'll learn to appreciate those sunny days all the more.

The gift of sunny autumn days

The first storm of the fall brought inches of rain and a taste of what winter has in store. The freshet brought high water to the fields in front of our house, and we scrambled to move things away should it go much higher. Motorcycles went into the basement, tacked up in the barn loft.

When the storm moved on, we saw the return of brilliant blue, but the water took a while to drain away out of the fields. Amy and the girls tried to paddle out on kayaks in the field and found little current. When I got off work the next day we went out on the water as dusk approached. In stillness, we glided along the mirrored sunset. We wondered why we had never thought of this before.

Along the way, however, we feel the light of the sun that we know won't be around forever — something that is easy to forget during August. We watch the maple seeds spin around us as we travel down the road. We watch the western sky for dark clouds and smile when we see only blue. We spot the bright yellow turning amid the evergreen, splashed red with vine maple in the autumn light.

Each sunny day in autumn is a gift — a jewel found on a beach of stones.

Ed Hunt is a registered nurse and former newspaper and magazine writer. He lives in Grays River, Washington. His book "The Huckleberry Hajj" is now available on Amazon. He blogs at theebbtide.blogspot.com and RedTriage.com.