



An Extraordinary Summer

Labor Day is upon us, the kids are back to school, and the sun sets earlier every night. Officially, there are still three weeks until the end of summer, but despite what the calendar says, I'm already starting to look around and reflect on the record-busting 'learning experience' that was the summer of '21.

My gardens are, in a word, a shambles. Now, some of that is my fault. I started the summer determined to reglaze all the windows in my long-neglected house. Out of seventeen, nine are finished, five are in progress, and three still in their frames mock me. I work on them mostly in the mornings, before it gets too hot, and whatever gardening I manage is sandwiched in the sliver of evening after it cools down but before the mosquitos attack. So I have an excuse, or at least an explanation, for the crabgrass plantations that replaced flower beds. But much of what went wrong this summer is attributable to the extraordinary weather.

Last year my newly-built vegetable garden was blessed with beginner's luck. I grew bright purple eggplant, orange and green tomatoes, lettuce and peas, even a few squash before the squash vine borers prevailed. This year was a very different story. I had never quite gotten around to putting in an irrigation system this spring, but as it turned out, I didn't need one. This July's rain was more than *seven inches above normal*, and though I never planted mushrooms, they grew everywhere. Leaves mildewed, blossoms melted in downpours before they could be pollinated, and tomatoes rotted before they ripened. Not that it mattered much: A woodchuck discovered my garden this spring. He (or she) likes to sample every surviving tomato, taking a single bite from each. My entire row of cabbages, and the adjacent row of kohlrabi, lost their heads. An eight-foot-high fence may discourage the deer, but it's clear that, if I want to harvest anything next year, I'll have to extend the fencing below ground level, all the way around. Not what I had in mind when I took those archaeology courses.

I couldn't even grow zucchini! The easiest vegetable to grow, the butt of gardening jokes because of its relentless productivity, but I, a Master Gardener, managed nothing but a single stunted fruit that rotted before it turned green. Butternut squash are supposed to be almost foolproof, too, but not for this fool. Squash plants, like most fruits, only produce fruit when pollen from a male flower is transferred to a female flower. It's fairly easy to tell one from the other: Female flowers have a small embryonic fruit at their base, while males have only a stem. But I've been checking all

summer, and there are no females. Blame it on the perpetual heatwaves: when the temperature rises above 85 degrees or so, plants get stressed and may produce only male flowers. July of this year, which should have been prime zucchini-growing season, was the hottest month *ever* recorded. A sobering reminder that climate change isn't an abstract idea but a practical threat.

Strange things happened in the flower beds, too. August into October are the glory days for dahlias, and mine are starting to bloom in earnest, but many varieties are unrecognizable. My prize "Café au Lait" were a romantic creamy buff to blush pink last year, but this summer they're blooming an insipid yellow and unappealing mauvey-purple. Last year's standout orange varieties are muddy and faded, and even the yellows lack conviction. These aren't just the same varieties, mind you. They're the exact same plants, dug up last fall, carefully labeled and packed away for the winter. Dahlias have eight sets of chromosomes instead of the more usual two, which allows for dramatic variability, but they're also blessed (cursed?) with plasticity, meaning they're known to change color and/or form from one year to the next, or even during one growing season. All I can do is hope the colors I so admired last year return when the cooler weather finally arrives.

In my courtyard, the usually well-behaved nepeta and beebalm that were only two feet tall last year are above head height, and so is the anise hyssop. Like most of the perennials, all three bloomed early but faded fast in the uncommon heat. On the bright side, last year's cleome self-seeded everywhere. The sparkly pink and white flowers, gorging on constant rain and heat, crowd against the apple trees, jostle with the ageratum, and even make themselves at home in the crevices of my new stone walkway. They and the coneflowers are favorites of a pair of goldfinches and a newly resident hummingbird.

Speaking of birds, before I finish, I am pleased to tell you that the Audubon Society believes it's safe to start setting out bird feeders again. For the birds' sake, it's still important to practice good hygiene. Clean the feeders and bird baths at least weekly. Use bleach, and be sure to rinse thoroughly (if you can still smell the bleach, keep rinsing). Our goal is to keep the birds well-fed and healthy through the coming winter, so that, come spring, they can rebuild their numbers.

Cherish September, and the hoped-for temperateness it may bring.