



Still Raining

More often than not, ideas for blog topics are inspired by details I notice while working in my garden. But here I am, up against a deadline, and it's raining. Again. Dreary, constant, and predicted to last all day and into tomorrow. Climate change warms the air, warm air holds more moisture, and moisture-laden air builds more storms, and so we've blown way past the average for annual rainfall. Tracks are flooded, so the trains aren't running. Raphael's fountain pool overflows, driving the frogs from their favorite nooks, and the front walkway looks like a kiddie splash pad. The gardens have never looked worse, or been less productive. It's been like this all summer long, and even when it's not actually raining, it's too wet to work the beds. What can I write about, in this season of endless rain?

Ah.

"Blame it on the rain," every gardener says, correctly, but how? What, exactly, is going on? Unfortunately, there are several paths to destruction.

One of the most obvious is fungal disease, often showing up as black spots or a haze of powdery mildew on foliage, or as an unwelcome blemish on or inside fruits and vegetables. Mushrooms pop up everywhere—wish I were knowledgeable enough to know which I could safely add to fall casseroles and which are better saved for murderous intent. Good air circulation helps, so give plants plenty of space and keep up with weeding. Homemade fungicides include solutions of baking soda, dish detergent, or pyrethrin (made from ground-up painted daisy petals—what pretty poison!). Just don't apply them to new transplants or in bright sunshine.

Too much rain can leach nutrients from soil, leaving roots unable to feed the plant. You can try to replenish the soil with fertilizers, but exercise restraint, because these additives are also going to filter into groundwater, eventually finding their way down to the river and ultimately to Long Island Sound. Over-fertilized waters, especially when nitrogen-heavy, contribute to algae bloom and encourage the growth of already-problematic invasive aquatic species. It's best to stick to organic mulches instead of chemical mixes, which are notoriously easy to overdo.

It's all interconnected—something of which I was forcibly reminded a few summers ago. Someday Pond was created by digging out a large elbow in the stream that comes down the hill and curves around my back yard. Since there's a constant flow of water, there's an overflow pipe, and the excess moves past the dam, skirts my neighbor's yard, and continues down under Walkley Hill Road

toward the river. As happens every so often after heavy rains, I realized I didn't hear the water moving, so I pulled on my tall rubber boots and waded out to clear the clogged pipe. A water level raised six or seven inches represents many thousands of gallons, all of which went rushing downstream the instant the blockage was cleared. Moments later, two puzzled and very wet public works employees, who had been repairing a storm drain in the street just below, came searching for the source of their sudden drenching. Oops.

But I digress. Back to the rain...Even in the absence of fungal infection, even if the soil is full of nutrients, extended rain can still kill your plants. Super-saturated soil deprives roots of essential oxygen. They can't absorb water efficiently, and become drought-stressed. Paradoxically, in the wettest weather, they can wilt or collapse. Heavy clay soil exacerbates the problem, so make sure your soil is well amended with lots of fluffy organic material. After extended periods of rain, pull back layers of mulch to speed evaporation. Don't be surprised if you see leaves wilt when the sun finally reappears—they are losing water too rapidly, possibly even to the point of leaf tissue drying out and dying (leaf scorch). If the affected area isn't too large, try shading the plants during the hottest part of that first bright day. You can also try gently pushing your spading fork straight down around the plant, in order to open up the soil. But don't dig vigorously, because that will only compact it even more.

Raised beds will drain first, of course. I don't have any, yet, in the vegetable garden, but I'm adding that to next year's list, in hopes that next year's tomatoes won't crack open under the pressure of too much water. Meanwhile, it's obvious that the happiest flowerbeds are the ones placed high on the hillside, which are still thriving even as the water drowns their cousins lower down. Note to self: put the fussiest and most expensive varieties at the top.

Don't despair. Even in flooded areas, most plants will survive if the water recedes within 24 hours, and trees can survive a week of immersion. If the weather service can be believed, October sunshine--finally!--lies ahead.