

Anyone Growing Nothing?

Al Chomica, July 11, 2020

Can you recall at the start of the Covid 19 pandemic how many new gardeners cropped up? Soil, seeds, plants and garden tools were all in short supply as these new gardeners tried their hand at becoming self-sufficient by growing their own food. Now, a few months later, I keep getting asked the same questions by so many people. Why didn't my plants grow? Why didn't my seeds come up? What's wrong with my tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers?

Gardeners feeling frustrated with their lack of success often ask me what is the easiest thing to grow. My answer is very simple. The easiest thing to grow is nothing!

Much of what has happened to many plants and crops has to do with the weather, or conditions that the weather has caused. Here in Nanoose we often joke about Juneuary and how it is so hard on plants. Now there are two new boys on the block – Mayvember and Julcember. At time of writing I have been chased back in the house by rains as I tried to pick rotting raspberries. This morning was cool and still wet from the misting rains that cause most fruits to rot. The humidity is always up around the 70% level or higher and since the sun seldom shines, nothing has dried out now for about two and a half months. And then there is the wind that hasn't stopped blowing for almost three months straight. It is like the perfect storm...

I have heard that the fruit trees as well as most of the nut harvests in Europe have failed this year due to this same weather we are getting. I heard Italy's olive crops have failed as well and they are now scavenging all the olive oil they can find around the globe.

Supposedly it is all about the Solar Minimum phase the earth is into over the next few years. It is easy to see how so many cultures like the Mayans or Anasazi could just fade away in the past. A couple years of no food would certainly make populations move along and desert what they had built over centuries of development. All my warm weather crops have stalled and unless something drastic changes, I doubt we will harvest many garden veggies this year. Weeds are doing great however...

We are fortunate to be where we are with our 'food forest' because it is well established and has incredible diversity. Even though many attempts at growing things have sadly failed we still have an enormous bounty with some things. Allow me to cover off some of the food we grow and the status of how they are doing.

Garlic – every year our garlic and shallot crops fail due to the dreaded 'White Rot' fungus. It regularly happens in Juneuary and moves rapidly through the patch at about one foot per day. It attacks the roots and prevents the plants from feeding anymore. The heads can never mature and the bulbs start to rot. This year we had a three-pronged approach to battling this fungal disease and I can proudly say we managed to save half our crop. This was accomplished by soil drenches made from compost tea, wood vinegar and anti-pathogenic extracts that we make.

Raspberries and Marionberries – this year, is a first. Although these berries make up the bulk of the fruit we will consume for the next year, this year our raspberries are tiny and not very sweet at all. The yellow raspberries start to grow grey mould before they even ripen and the Marionberry never even sweetened up before they got covered in grey mould.

Strawberries did extremely well this season up until two weeks ago when it got close to single digits right after a heavy rain. We still had an enormous crop to pick but overnight all the strawberries turned to mush. Blueberries – they are doing very well with cold, wet conditions. One called Pink Lemonade seldom has much fruit but this year the plant is loaded. This is due to the warm spell we had in April when the flowers had opened and the many Mason Bees, we provided homes for, were witnessed pollinating the flowers.

Melons and cucumbers - the melons were going to be a big part of the garden this year but I have lost well over a dozen rare and prized melons. Several strategies to combat the cold and wet were put into place but then the slugs and Pill Bugs ate them all up. Any planted in the ground just turned yellow and shrivelled up from the cold. One row of our favourite cantaloupes was replanted four times but the Pill Bugs liked them so much they took them all. Same with the rare Ancient Watermelon. They ate them all and we have no more seed. Some of the melons I planted were doing so poorly I had to dig them up again and repot them where they are still waiting for the weather to warm up. The only watermelons we will see this year will be from three healthy plants growing in the greenhouse in a big box with bottom heat.

Cucumbers - these are normally being turned into dill pickles at this time of year but since two crops of cucumbers have died already, our late third planting is barely surviving and we are far from eating a fresh cucumber.

Lettuce and cabbages – they just love this weather. Huge leaves and vigorous growth have already provided us with the first head of cabbage.

Peas – now into our fourth planting but the crops are not great this year. The plants put out a couple flowers and then start yellowing and shrivel up shortly afterward.

Pears – although we had well over 100 pounds last year, this year I count six pears on two trees! When the trees were in full flower in May they were subjected to high winds and lashing rains preventing any of the flowers from being visited by pollinators.

Apples - they seem normal as far as crops go but the trees are affected by apple canker and many big branches just shrivel up and die. The trees are getting smaller and smaller as the infected limbs get cut out.

Figs – they also do well in this weather except for the lashing winds. The last windstorm that ripped everything to pieces snapped off many of the heavily-laden branches. Figs are sought after by raccoons so we may lose our bumper crop this year.

Cherries - we have three trees that all bloom at different times. The earliest was just loaded this year with an estimated harvest of about 60 – 80 pounds. When it first warmed up in June for a couple days, the tree shed 50% of its small cherries to the ground. The crows started to rob the unripe cherries on it and although I managed to find a bowl of ripe fruit, they cleaned out the entire tree by landing in large swarms and just eating everything.

Our favourite tree is a Malaspina Cherry that produces large, sweet, dark red fruit. It is not even close to being ripe yet. This morning I chased away about 20 crows and they all flew away with sour cherries in their beaks.

Our third cherry is a pie cherry with nice, sweet fruit. It was looking almost ready yesterday and this morning I found the tree smashed, the ground littered by branches and half-eaten fruit thanks to the raccoons. It was major devastation. And then the Yellowjackets arrived and have so far destroyed about 3% of all the cherries.

Hazelnuts – once again our trees are loaded with great crops. They are favourites for the crows, squirrels, raccoons and rats. We have two 15-year old trees that were slated to be removed because they just did not produce anything for years. But when we planted special varieties that were suited as cross-pollinators, the big hazelnuts also became pollinated. As I view these trees from a distance there are so many nuts on them that we will definitely have enough to share with all the varmints.

Next year things may change around again. The key to having a successful garden around these parts is to create diversity...