

Weather or Not

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“Thank you. Lovely to see the multitudes of you and to be back in this fine hall where many of us have enjoyed eventful gatherings in the past. I do appreciate the organizing committee for putting together this timely event and for inviting even the likes of myself to shuffle onstage among today’s distinguished speakers. And, as goes without saying, thanks to all of you for being here as well.

Now, unhappily, I think we’re all painfully aware of the climate catastrophes afflicting the planet and of the daunting indications of what the future portends. Nevertheless, I think it’s important to recognize that the challenges of climate, while never more urgent than they are today, have always constituted a fundamental component of the gardening life. Gardening is, at its pith, a long and elaborate seasonal dance involving the gardener and the weather. Indeed, to hear certain gardeners talk, you’d sometimes conclude that their deepest passion in life is not really for growing plants at all, but rather for observing weather patterns, discussing weather patterns, blaming and deploring weather patterns. The garden itself seems cast in a mere supporting role, serving as a sort of fantastically elaborate backdrop against which to gauge the impact of the real superstar: climate.

On and on gardeners prattle: what a late spring it is; what a dreadful wind sucking all the moisture out of the soil; oh, this heat dome’s going to be the end of me. Not to

mention being swept away in atmospheric rivers. These were unheard of in years past but now seem to come pouring in at us on a regular basis. The gardener's analysis suffers no half measures, no moderation: this is absolutely the hottest or wettest or driest or coldest summer in living memory, no doubt about it. Or this has to be by far the longest winter, the earliest autumn frost they've ever experienced. New records for rainfall or rainlessness are set every year by their sketchy reckoning. Then, just as you're imagining the conversation has finally, mercifully run its course, some meddlesome oldtimer will recollect the summer of '54 when it snowed in July, and that will set them off all over again.

Most of this jawboning is by way of complaint, of bitter hardships endured. Pummelled repeatedly, gardeners begin to view the weather, and the universe generally, as malevolent forces that exist for the sole purpose of wrecking havoc upon their best laid plans. You know it as well as I do: transplant your squash plants outdoors in late spring, after a painstaking hardening-off process, and a cold front is sure to come roaring out of the north that very night and blast the poor things to a sickly purple. Put out some brassicas, on the other hand, young plants that love nothing so much as a cool, moist spell during which to get themselves established, and the sun is sure to blaze down as though you were gardening in the sub-Saharan. Repeatedly roughed up this way, gardeners conclude over time that Weather is out to get them. It's not a partner in the joyful dance of the garden, it's a malevolent intruder.

This conviction can provoke a certain combativeness and perhaps explains in part why so many gardeners ignore common sense in pursuit of their goals. These embattled but defiant aficionados know precisely what they're doing, thank you very much, and they're not about to be knocked off course by minor setbacks from a patch of dirty weather. Come wind or rain, or whatever else capricious natural forces may throw at them, they'll damn well do as they please. Many of them, for example, learn to cultivate an unhealthy skepticism about hardiness zones. Whatever the warnings about hardiness, growers seem perversely determined to ignore them. They instead develop an exaggerated estimation of their own expertise in the matter of local micro-climates. Oh, don't worry about it being a zone ten specimen; we'll snuggle it into that sunny little nook under the

kitchen window and it'll do just fine. Such antics are part of the gardener's recklessness in what is known as "pushing the hardiness zones." This manifests itself as an irrational compulsion to cultivate plants that cannot possibly survive local growing conditions. I think of it as a form of horticultural bungee jumping.

Take late winter as a case in point. Anyone with any sense and sufficient funds is off in Hawaii or Mexico, reclining by a swimming pool, idly sipping margaritas under a canopy of massed bougainvillea blossoms. But not intrepid gardeners. We're sticking close to home because we've got our premature seedlings to tend to. In some households the fever commences before Christmas decorations are down. Seeds are sown in pots that are swathed in plastic bags and placed in warm locations all over the house. By February every windowsill in the place is crowded with anemic seedlings. Mealtime conversations are dominated by lengthy discussions of damping off and perceived breaks in the weather. By March the seedlings are leggier than a bevy of fashion models and the gardener is tempted to scrape away the blanket of snow to ascertain if the soil is warming up yet. As spring advances, eager gardeners keep themselves occupied by transplanting out tender annuals and trying to prevent their certain death in subsequent arctic outflows. Inspiringly, the undaunted gardener shakes a puny fist in the face of any approaching polar vortex.

Unhappily, all too many of these grand designs for "getting a jump on spring" crash dismally. Premature seedlings, barely clinging to life, are eventually jettisoned; there's a flurry of emergency re-seeding, much of it now begun too late. Frantic, the gardener dashes to the neighbourhood garden centre and loads up on young plants whose appearance of astounding health and vigour, one knows, is a chimera conjured by non-stop grow lights and fertilizer force feedings in hothouses. We remain in touching denial that under our ministrations these leafy beauties are destined to falter and wilt within hours of purchase. Throughout this entire comic opera the gardener continues to peevishly blame the weather for any setbacks encountered.

As is obvious to any impartial observer, most of the pre-season hullabaloo has less to do with the ultimate success of the resulting garden than with the gardener's compulsion to

be doing something useful during the long stretch between ordering seeds from the catalogues and actually getting germination underway. In these parts May 24 was long considered the earliest traditional date for putting out plants susceptible to frost. Some local oldtimers still won't so much as set spade to soil before that watershed date, even though the spinach season, for example, is all but over and broad beans should be half-way grown by then. The old geezer's faintheartedness is a symptom of people shell-shocked from too many years being blindsided by maliciously contrary weather. Treat them with kindness.

On the other hand, there's nothing quite so off-putting as the smug self-satisfaction of persons who actually succeed in somehow outwitting the cruelest months of spring. You know the sort. Dripping with false modesty, they'll invite you over for a meal featuring home-grown broccoli in April, and later on they'll be conspicuously enjoying ripe tomatoes before your plants have even set fruit. Invariably these overachievers have developed ingenious schemes involving greenhouses, poly tunnels, hot frames and cloches. They will discourse on the intricacies of this infrastructure for far longer than required, bringing to mind Winston Churchill's enduring definition of a fanatic as someone who can't change his mind and won't change the topic. It's not so much that the rest of us are envious of their picking fresh cilantro a full month earlier than we do, it's just that they can be so insufferable about it. And their artificial modesty can be annoyingly cloying. Privately you suspect their methods. Their tumescent cucumbers, for example, seem always to have a suggestion of testosterone about them.

Back home, you're gratified to recognize in your own approach to springtime planting a fine balance between the extremes of unnatural haste on the one hand and fearful inertia on the other. Besides, you do eventually get some deserved recognition too, because springtime especially produces a veritable torrent of weather talk among gardeners, and it's particularly gratifying for plants-people with established reputations to be consulted by eager neophytes. (And, lord knows, the field is marvellously crowded nowadays with eager neophytes.) "Is it too early to plant peas?" one is asked. "Is it still too cold, do you think, for cosmos?" Such enquiries should where possible be entertained out-of-doors, in full gardening regalia, and preferably leaning casually on a

spade or fork. The proper rubric requires that the ersatz expert scan the sky meaningfully, take note and make pithy observation on the state of nearby native plants, perhaps crumble a handful of topsoil knowledgeably and then quote something like the old Ontario pioneer farmer's adage: "Plant corn when oak leaves are as big as a squirrel's ear." Best results are achieved if you then resume spading or forking purposively.

In addition to time-worn adages, these well seasoned gardeners like to have a few microclimatic tricks up their sleeves to outwit their nemesis. The harsher the climate, the more vicious weather's killer instincts, the more dazzling these stratagems. So you find certain craggy characters out on the Prairies, where nothing stands between them and the North Pole but a couple of barbed-wire fences, gamely training espaliered fruit trees on a north-south axis so that the north wind whistles right past, doing minimal damage. Other windswept growers put tremendous faith in microclimates created by walls, fences, and hedges that deflect freezing winds and trap pockets of precious extra warmth. These aren't people to be daunted by permafrost, and they're certainly not about to be intimidated by threats of premature thawing or winter sun scald. Unfortunately, too many years spent gardening in brutal growing conditions can induce in certain persons an irrational truculence, a refusal to acknowledge that their microclimatic cleverness has its limits. They become weather vane. It's truly disconcerting, for example, to encounter a seasoned grower in the wilds of northern Saskatchewan seriously contemplating the cultivation of mangoes.

On the other end of the spectrum, we find certain poor wretches immobilized by climate anxiety. They question and wonder and repeatedly consult their manuals. They go online and absorb gardening advice that might at best be described as speculative fiction. But take my word for it, there's nothing quite like having your place on public display in a home and garden tour to fetch up a chronic case of climate anxiety. Besides fretting over what the weather will be like on the actual tour days, rain being the most predictable, there's the added stress of not knowing which plants will be in what condition on the big day. Will the peonies have opened? Will the clematis hold off from wilting long enough? One remembered fragment from the Denman tour has entered the

realm of local legend. A cool, wet spring that year had most plants well behind schedule. One fastidious gentleman whose gardens were going to be on display, panicked beforehand that very few of his prized roses were going to be in bloom. Secretly he set about prowling the rosary with a hair drier blowing warm air onto the recalcitrant rose buds in an unsuccessful, but now legendary, attempt to outwit mother nature.

More practically, the greenhouse, of course, offers the accomplished gardener invaluable opportunities for doing an end-run around inclement weather. In my own case, for example, when we constructed a 9 by 12 foot glass greenhouse attached to the house, we imagined our climate anxieties were finally at an end. With a state-of-the art germination chamber, running water at hand, generous venting that included a thermostatically controlled venting fan, we imagined ourselves incontrovertibly beyond the reach of filthy weather. And certainly the magnificent seedlings and subsequent bounty of heat-loving species, the tomatoes and bell peppers and cucumbers and eggplants that thrived in that little glass house was a wonder to behold. Come wind, come rain or hail, come any filthy condition the atmosphere might hurl at us, we sailed blithely through it.

However. A few years earlier we'd planted a half dozen 'Skyline' gleditsia trees on the south side of the house under whose dappled shade we imagined the house and environs would remain blessedly cool all summer. This variety of honey locust would, we were advised authoritatively, develop a slender canopy likely to reach a maximum height of perhaps thirty-five feet. But within a few short years, several of them shot well up above that height and each unfurled a mighty canopy that could rival an ancient oak's. These weren't skylines, they were sky scrapers. Beneath them the house and greenhouse huddled in intensifying shade, as though we were living on the corner of Georgia and Granville. Although the house remained blessedly cool through the worst of summer's heat, the greenhouse's once magnificent production faltered and dwindled to the point that the only thing you could grow in the gathering gloom was cave-dwelling lichen.

Plan 'B' called for constructing another greenhouse up in the relatively sunny vegetable patch. Rather than repeat the whole concrete and glass extravaganza, we opted for a

plastic house instead. Nowadays they're inelegantly referred to as poly tunnels, but I find the term distasteful, and insist upon greenhouse. Whatever the name, their one great advantage is that theoretically they can be readily dismantled and moved to another spot, which is a great feature if you're growing the same crops in them year after year.

Following the gospel of internet advice, we erected a 10 by 12 foot structure using 3/4inch PVC pipe and fittings and covering it with greenhouse plastic attached to the frame with rather clever home-made clips. All proceeded reasonably well that first year until an unforeseen early snowfall flattened the whole works before we'd thought to remove the plastic for winter. Artfully employing duct tape and wire we cobbled it back together the following spring and then installed a second structure, this time using sturdier 1-inch pipe. The two of them now squat side-by-side flapping with tattered plastic and looking like something from an unfortunate refugee camp. Despite the initial attraction of portability, neither has moved over the years and likely never will. But we personally have moved many miles, because a considerable distance lies between our home and the greenhouses. A steep hill must be climbed twice a day for opening and closing greenhouse doors. And the question frequently recurs: is it worth the hike all the way up there just for a few measly basil leaves? Now, as their allotted lifespan nears an end, we're seriously considering the purchase of a proper fancy greenhouse, all available bells and whistles, with a dissenting voice proposing that we could instead choose to go back to using the original skookum glass house by cutting down the excessively shady gleditsias and relying instead on the new heat pump to keep the house cool in summer. Final Score: climate 1, smartypants gardeners zero.

As much as we moan and groan about the challenges posed by winter weather, many a gardener, including myself, is at least equally put off by excessive summer heat. Who wouldn't despise sweltering through weeks of cloudless skies with daytime temperatures roaring up into the thirties. These blast-furnace conditions, where one's skin seems to scorch within minutes of exposure, are not my idea of the good old summertime. Pale of skin and once-upon-a-time red of hair not yet thinning, I have, when younger and not nearly so wise, suffered enough brutal sunburns to last a lifetime. I was one of those kids

who, when compelled to go to the lake or some wretched outdoor pool, would huddle in the shade swaddled in protective clothing while swarthy boys dived and swam and frolicked in the sunshine with pretty girls. A wallflower longing to become a sunflower, I tried the frolicking thing a few times myself, only to be ignored by the pretty girls and burnt like a potato chip for my trouble.

Now, when the heat wave's on, as it was again this summer, I rise at dawn and try get most of my outdoor chores done before the solar furnace gets fired up. I cherish these lovely early hours in the garden, the plants moistened with silvered dew, the cool air charged with refreshing expectancy. Then, as the heat builds, I retreat to shady sanctuary.

Without such precautions, summer heat can ignite in even the most mild-mannered gardener an uncharacteristic grumpiness that may degenerate by mid-afternoon into smouldering misanthropy. One begins developing murderous resentments towards boneheaded politicians squandering our hard-earned tax dollars on stupidities while the earth continues overheating. Perversely, we seek out gardening acquaintances who are more than ready to trade in their complaints over the cold, wet spring for updated lamentations about drought and desiccation.

Long after mad dogs and Englishmen have retreated to cooling shade, some gardeners can be caught out in the midday sun, moving soaker hoses around, fretting over leaf burn and predicting the end of civilization as we know it. We find ourselves trapped between the demands of garden maintenance on the one hand and the prudence of avoiding exposure to hazardous UV rays. I used to rely on an old straw hat to keep the summer sun off, straw hats customarily being to gardeners what hard hats are to construction workers. But eventually I came to realize that straw hats, no matter how wide the brim, are hopelessly ineffective at blocking harmful radiation. Then by happy chance I was gifted a fancy new cap designed specifically to block UV. Practical to a fault, it sported a large bill as well as a neck-protecting flap, all of it a brilliant luminescent red. Wearing it, I was advised by acquaintances, I rather resembled an oversized pileated woodpecker.

But any talk about weather must include at least a cursory discussion of appropriate gardening attire. My fancy UV hat aside, I adhere religiously, as I'm sure you do too, to the ancient and inalienable right of gardeners to dress in rags. The time-honoured dress code, as we know, is to wear while gardening those clothes that have become too shabby to be worn anywhere else. Comfort, familiarity and a certain devil-may-care insouciance far outweigh considerations of prevailing taste. Torn t-shirts, unraveling woollen sweaters and dress shirts with irredeemable ring-around-the-collar are all appropriate. Colour coordination is not necessarily a consideration. I can think of no compelling reason, for example, that while pruning the roses one's socks should match. Nor is stylish footwear a specialty of the average plants-person, for whom practicality is of the essence. One is in and out of doors so frequently, ease of slipping footwear off and on is crucial. This is best accomplished with battered runners or dress shoes that have seen better days. Laces are eventually discarded or permanently knotted, and the backs of the shoes are flattened under impatient heels so that one ends up flapping around the patio garden in unprepossessing flip-flops.

For people so frequently down on hands and knees, appearance is the least consideration to be applied to trousers. Splitting resistance is everything. Among the finest work pants I ever owned was a pair of unfortunate casual slacks acquired for a pittance from the Sally Ann thrift shop. Fashioned from 100 per cent polyester, miraculously stretchy and hideously yellow, they resisted tearing and fraying for what seemed like decades. Baggy old soccer pants are good too, except that they often lack sufficient pocketing. We all know pockets are indispensable for holding entangled scraps of twine, small tools, markers from newly planted specimens whose names one fully intends to write down somewhere, and the seed heads of pernicious weeds or blighted leaves seized in passing. Muddy and/or torn knees are *de rigueur* in pants and there's certainly no reason to be ashamed of a fly zipper that has lost its zip. When seams do eventually split, particularly in sensitive areas, they can be closed with strategically placed safety pins, a standard, if hazardous, accessory in the retro-grunge gardener's ensemble.

Hats, of course, are an essential element in both summer and winter. In cold weather I rely upon a battered baseball cap with foam rubber lining that keeps my bald patch warm. As well I'm partial to an ancient down vest that exudes through multiple tears and punctures tiny puffs of goose down whenever I move. I shan't dwell long on gloves, as one of each pair is so quickly lost among the compost heaps and leaf-mould piles, mixed pairs are as common as in tennis. Every so often I come upon an old glove lying in some unlikely corner of the garden, like the hand of an old friend waving in greeting, perhaps a bit the worse for wear from a few months of rain and the preliminary gnawings of decomposer organisms. As often as not, all the glove needs is a bit of a shake and good drying out and it can be cycled back into the revolving collection of gloves about which the only real mystery is why one ends up with multiples that fit one hand and none for the other.

The combined effect of these sartorial arrangements is a gardening ensemble that many a gardener might mistake for their own, but one guaranteed to incite dismay in any up-and-coming power gardener. Every so often a party of immaculately attired strangers will wander into our place, uninvited and unannounced, only to behold Sandy and myself smeared in dirt and perspiration, as often as not down on our knees, resplendent in our tattered outfits that no self-respecting knight of the road would sleep under a bridge in. The looks of shocked dismay on our visitors' faces are well worth the bother of an unscheduled work stoppage.

However appropriately attired they may or may not be, certain growers are inspired by an unearthly faith in new varieties of plants that clever hybridizers or, increasingly, genetic engineers, have developed for particular climatic conditions. A few years ago my attention was drawn to a tomato named 'Oregon Spring.' As the name implies, it's designed to thrive in the cool-summer conditions of the Pacific Northwest. Splendid results were achieved with our first planting of them – an abundance of perfectly ripened tomatoes well ahead of the three other varieties struggling alongside. Here at last, we exulted, lay the solution to our pre-September tomato-less salads.

Much heartened, the following year we planted out dozens of Oregon Springs and cut back on the cherry tomatoes, 'Golden Queens' and 'Early Girls'. Naturally, the summer developed into one of the hottest on record, a banner year for warm-weather crops of all types. Peppers and eggplants and squash all ran amok. But the oh-so-cool 'Oregon Springs' decided to sulk. I've never seen a more stunted, wizened, disease-ridden and generally bad-tempered bunch of tomatoes in my life. If fusarium wilt didn't get them, blossom end rot did. Their scabrous fruits hung green and peevish, while nearby vines of other varieties sagged with majestically ripening fruits.

One learns over time not to question this sort of thing, nor to be too thrown off by it. As garden writer Henry Mitchell put it, disaster is the normal state of any garden. Like storm-tossed castaways, we grasp at any bits of flotsam or jetsam, any horticultural straw that might save us from the tempest. In growing hardy perennials, for example, some dreamers reject designer cultivars, preferring an 'origin of species' approach. A trifle Darwinian, and perhaps too level-headed for many gardeners, this stratagem involves seeking out plants that originated in a climate type similar to the climate where one lives. So, for example, our winter wet/summer dry regime accords handsomely with certain areas of the eastern Mediterranean. Plants genetically adapted to particular climate regimes, so the theory goes, will most readily adapt to similar growing conditions elsewhere. Einstein should have been this smart. To find plants that will 'naturally' take to one's garden and climate, the Darwinian gardener asks where the plants originated. This is far too sensible an approach to be adopted by most gardeners and so we carry on, optimistically laboring to cultivate the posh ornamentals seen to such grand advantage in the estate gardens of Great Britain, where the climate doesn't actually resemble our own.

All of the foregoing – the fine talk about climates of origin, climate-specific cultivars, and artfully contrived micro-climates – is, in the final analysis, just so much bluff and bluster in the teeth of a gale. Certain realities are entirely predictable: if you fully intend to securely support the alstromerias but postpone the chore until tomorrow morning, it's reasonably certain that hurricane-force winds will strike that very night and flatten the spineless beauties beyond resurrection. On the very day that your herbaceous

peonies begin to unfold their enormous double blooms for the wonderment of all, there's sure to be monsoon-level rains that will degrade those many-petalled miracles into something resembling sopping pom-poms on chopsticks. Put tender pelargoniums out in the warming days of spring and you'll draw down a killing frost from somewhere. Tardiness in cropping off bell peppers in the fall will fetch the same result. Ice and hail, wind and frost – the names of the devil are legion.

At the heart of our dilemma is the wretched unpredictability of it all. 'Anyone who tries to forecast weather around here,' mutter local curmudgeons, 'is either a newcomer or a fool.' Another of their well-worn lines is the classic "If you don't like the weather here, just wait five minutes." But you have to wonder, really, if this unpredictability isn't a thoroughly modern phenomenon, because we've inherited a substantial body of folk wisdom concerning weather and its accurate forecasting. 'A red sun got water in his eye' predicts an old Newfoundland adage. And we all acknowledge that old Newfoundland adages are beyond dispute, in a way that Toronto truisms, for example, seldom are. My own dear old mum favoured the 'red sky at night, sailor's delight' school of thought. 'When muskrats build their houses high look for a hard winter,' warns another trusty old nugget; and another one instructs: 'When the pigs run and play, expect a rainy day.'

With neither pigs nor muskrats at hand, most of us depend upon the weatherpersons on the evening news or CBC Radio or – God help us all – Environment Canada's web page. Once upon a time I maintained considerable respect for weather forecasters. I pictured them as retiring fellows with suspenders and clipped mustaches who spent their days faithfully examining rain gauges and barometers. Their cautious and modest forecasts nevertheless rang with an authoritative accuracy. Nowadays their unpretentious dedication has been swept away in favour of the abrasive prattle of toothsome airheads, backed by satellite imagery and AI simulations – in short, entertainers, who seem to specialize only in getting their hair right and everything else entirely wrong. Here on the coast there used to be weather ships permanently stationed out in the slosh of the North Pacific. Crew members, unless inebriated, were generally successful at describing the weather moving towards the coast. But thanks to big brains in Ottawa, the ships were scrapped in favour of satellites, and life has never been the same since. 'Tomorrow will

be sunny with cloudy periods,' we're advised routinely, or cloudy with sunny periods. Meaning: expect anything from a hurricane to a heat dome. Desperate for ratings, they can't even get the weather that has already happened right: 'What a gorgeous day it was again today!' they'll crow through gleaming teeth, oblivious to a parching drought that has farmers, gardeners, streamkeepers and foresters down on their knees sobbing for rain. On really exciting days we'll get a "Special Weather Statement" warning us to put our patio chairs indoors lest a violent wind pick them up and throw them at us, inflicting fatal wounds.

As predictive reliability drops like rotten apples, there's a correlative rise in fantastic speculations about the cause of all this unseasonal weather. In days of yore, volcanic eruptions we're particularly popular. One of the locals would gingerly put down his beer stein, wipe the foam from his lips with the back of a gnarly hand, and explain at length how the eruption of Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines had strewn an unbelievable amount of ash into the atmosphere and that's precisely why the melons weren't ripening that year. Then a contrarian across the table would chip in with an opposite theory of how volcanic ash is actually compounding the greenhouse effect and contributing to global warming, so in fact the melons should actually have ripened earlier than usual. After a few minutes of deep thinking and meditative sipping, everyone around the table nods, perfectly content with twin theories that hypothesize diametrically opposite results. Another homegrown climatologist then introduces the topic of El Nino as the real cause of our crazy weather. This periodic warming of the eastern Pacific waters, we're informed, triggers all sorts of erratic behaviors in air circulation patterns. Wintertime warm air surges up the Pacific coast and daffodils burst into bloom in February.

For a while there, drifting holes in the ozone layer put an additionally interesting spin on the uncertainty. Five minutes of thinning the carrots in June could leave your skin blistering like a campfire weiner.

"The devil is busy in a high wind," says an old bit of folklore, to which gardeners tardy with their staking assignments, mutter agreement. Certain of our ancestors believed that

storms were purposively whipped up by malignant weather demons. Bells were often rung during a storm to frighten away evil spirits, while charms and magic incantations were recited. Rain dances were popular in certain arid locations. And let's be honest: the magical control of weather practiced by ancient peoples employing incantations, processions and other ritual actions seems positively rational compared with our own enlightened predilection for spewing out murderous greenhouse gases.

Aided and abetted, we have to agree, by the the same mainstream media geniuses who spent forty years discounting scientific warnings about an impending climate catastrophe, but now revel in broadcasting images of climate disasters across the planet as though the networks had been urgently warning us about them all along.

Back in the garden, we sometimes find our plantings staggering from a double whammy: long periods of unseasonably cool and moist conditions suddenly interspersed with clear days of mercilessly scorching sun. Our poor plants are caught, like unfortunate youngsters cursed with a volatile parent who swings between affection and rage for no discernible reason. The only upside in all of this being that any leaf-burn, die-back, yellowing, bark-cracking or other mishap may now be conveniently blamed on global climate change rather than one's own ineptitude.

But, dire as our circumstances today may seem, we can ill afford the luxury of despair. And we can take some slight solace in knowing that we gardeners at least are advantageously placed for dealing with the escalating vicissitudes of weather. For example, deep down, most of us appreciate that a numbing bit of winter is good for the spirit, not to mention for killing off black slugs and other pests. Lack of toughening frosts, we know, is a large part of the problem with places like southern California. Bud Grant figured this out long ago. Sports fans of a certain vintage may well remember Grant as a successful professional football coach, starting back in the sixties. He specialized in cold-weather franchises – Winnipeg in the Canadian Football League, then moving to equally frigid Minnesota in the National Football League. A square-jawed, grey-haired, joyless-looking fellow, and probably not a gardener, Grant put such faith in the toughening-up merits of cold weather he wouldn't have on his teams any

player, no matter how skilled, who hailed from warm-weather hotspots like Florida or southern California. In Bud's playbook there was no true grit to be found in soft climatic conditions. No matter how cold it was on game day, neither Bud nor his players could be found huddled in front of the sideline heaters favoured by the wimps and losers his teams regularly clobbered.

In these times of increased climatic uncertainty, I wonder if perhaps we gardeners could do worse than adopt the Bud Grant Hypothesis by placing our bets on tough and hardy players. In a word, plants more like ourselves, for nobody braves the elements with more bravado than the gardener. Indifferent to glacial cold and incandescent heat, the gardener potters about without even proper headgear. In monsoon conditions, when lesser mortals are vulcanized in rain suits and Wellingtons, the gardener's apt to be outdoors, hatless, in a pair of broken-down bedroom slippers and an unraveling woollen sweater. The same impractical outfit we might wear when stumbling out through the November night to shake a heavy snowfall off fragile shrubs. Why not then cast our lot with plants as robust as ourselves? Why not banish all those tender and half-hardy malingerers that require such massive infrastructure to coddle them through the least little bit of inclement weather? No more pouring reservoirs of precious water onto some frivolous exotic that wilts every time the sun shines. Let's put an end to dashing out into the October dark wearing only a billowing housecoat to throw protective blankets over problematic pipsqueaks that can't withstand a touch of frost. Let's go with more rugged specimens, native plants, tough customers and stout-hearted old species rather than mollycoddled hothouse cultivars. We'll laugh undaunted at the repeated blows of the climatic bully. We'll gaze with equanimity on the havoc wreaked by ice storms and frost heave, by atmospheric rivers or heat domes or hurricane force winds mauling the shrubbery. We'll clasp a rain-soaked slipper and shake it in bold defiance at the roiling skies. Up your's!

Or am I dreaming? Because, just imagine: if we couldn't talk about the weather, grumble about it, blame it for our failures, praise it for our triumphs, compare it with previous years, consult the Farmer's Almanac and our own dog-eared weather records,

hypothesize wildly about our increasingly crazy climate, what the heck would we have to talk about?

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