

# BREATHING ROOM: WHAT ARE YOU GROWING?

[NB: check the byline, thanks. /~Rayne]

It's been a while since I put up my last Breathing Room post; I probably should have put one up this past weekend.

~ ~ ~

I was too busy with my vegetable garden this weekend to put up a post, which got a late start here due to a late spring cold snap lasting a couple weeks.

I'm in what has been historically USDA plant zone 5a-5b. I've been on the cusp between them; some sensitive plants have behaved as if this is zone 4. This area's average last frost is May 25, so a late cold snap including frost should have been anticipated.

Unfortunately, most of us in this area have not paid much attention to this historical data and have been increasingly used to planting our gardens a week or two earlier. Some of us were taken by surprise by spring weather which actually agreed with historical data.

This says something about the climate crisis's slowly boiling frog. We didn't even notice that we have been gradually becoming used to earlier and earlier planting seasons over the last couple decades.

I should have noted it personally and expected the volatility in temperatures, swinging from nearly 90F in early/mid-May to nearly freezing and frost at the end of May. Over the last several years I've noticed some plants I've bought for floral planters have survived our winters – and that's never happened up until the last 4-5 years.

Every year I've spent money at the local

greenhouse on vinca minor (often called periwinkle). In the last 20 years I've planted it, it's escaped my pots as its vines trailed over and made contact with the border in which my flower pots sit. Each time it escaped the vines which suckered and started during the course of the summer didn't survive to spring.

At least not until 4-5 years ago. One vinca sucker survived. I pulled it out of the bed, planted a pot as usual the next spring only to have the process repeat. Three years ago the vinca survived in more than one border bed.

This year I found it had not only survived but completely swamped a rock garden border bed out of sight of the house and had already begun blooming by the end of mid-May's hot spell. I had to rip it all out by hand and I can't be certain I got it all. (I don't use glyphosate herbicides, ever.)

Now I've learned the hard way – literally on my knees, pulling out plants – vinca minor is an invasive species and I'm going to have to avoid using it or aggressively clean out flower beds at the end of the season, more so than I've done in the past.

I wonder what other formerly annual plants are now perennials in this zone because of climate change.

~ ~ ~

What I don't know now is how the changing climate will affect my vegetable garden, and beyond that, crops grown in this state. If you've eaten a pickle on a sandwich from a fast food restaurant, chances are pretty doggone good you ate a Michigan-grown cucumber. The question of how the changing climate – and it IS changing – will affect our food is a real and serious question.

In practical terms it means for me I can plan on extended seasons. Not only has the start of the gardening season advanced by days and weeks, it has ended later and later on average.

First frost advisories I'd noted on my long-term calendar:

2019 – October 14

2020 – October 2 (didn't actually get frost until 10/16)

2021 – October 23

2022 – October 2

A couple years ago I picked the season's last zucchini on October 23. Since this area's historical average first frost is September 25, I'd gained an entire month longer to harvest vegetables.

So what do I plant and when do I plant it if I can't predict with any degree of reliability when I can begin to plant and when harvest will end?

Good question. All I know is that the late spring cold snap and the local population of vegetable gardeners colluded unintentionally to buy up ALL the zucchini plants by the time I could get to the greenhouse. Same for basil, all varieties, and some of the oregano varieties.

They left not a single Early Girl or Lunchbox tomato plant. Even the greenhouses don't appear to be able to forecast market based on the climate or they would have had more of these perennial favorites available.

(Side note: Irritatingly, the seasoned gardeners knew to avoid the holiday rush on Memorial Day weekend, showing up on Tuesday morning instead, extending the holiday rush. A crowded greenhouse with poor ventilation is a COVID super spreader event in the making. Wear masks, people, COVID is still with us.)

Now I've had to buy seeds and start zucchinis, Early Girl tomatoes, and basil. The zucchinis will likely reach harvest since the varieties I've planted reach maturity in 45 days. The tomatoes I'm less certain of since they need closer to 60 days; it's that last week and

beyond which are always iffy for plants started late.

At least the seasonal forecast is for a warmer summer and winter with an El Niño cycle upon us, right?

If only climate change and the increasing variability of the jet stream didn't muck with predictions based on the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) cycle. This spring's late cold spell did not match seasonal predictions of a warmer spring.

The Canadian wildfires will also mess with weather predictions. We had haze for weeks because of the fires in Quebec and Michigan, which may have led to some cooling.

NOAA-NWS says summer will be warmer than average here in the Midwest, which seems obvious given both an El Niño and climate change.

But given late May's weird volatility and early June's constant smoky haze, who knows for sure? NOAA-NWS hasn't been able to say with specificity for years what impact the combination of the ENSO cycle and climate change will have on forecasts, either.

I'm going to hedge my bets and plan on a slightly longer, slightly drier season, but prepare to cover my plants in late August. In other words, the usual, but with more flexibility in my preparedness.

I'm also going plant some other greens indoors. I still can't buy Napa cabbage locally, haven't been able to do so for months now. This suggests growers in California are still having problems producing enough for the Midwest's market. If El Niño means a wetter California, I'm going to have to grow my own.

What other truck farming crops are still affected by the excessive rainfall and snow pack this past winter-spring?

So what about you – what are you growing this season? And if you're not a gardener, what changes are you noticing in your local vegetable market? How is the ENSO cycle and climate change affecting gardens and farming in your part of the world?

This is an open thread. Bring everything not on topic in other threads to this one.