

DOG DAYS IN THE GARDEN

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By the time you read this article, if you are like me, you'll be wishing for fall.

Between the ancient sacred festivals of Midsummer and Lughnasadh (August 1) the humidity alone is too much to bear at mid-day. By every

torpid afternoon, when only obese flies move about quickly, I begin to wonder if I might feel better reduced to a skeleton, so my frame could catch every pathetic draft. The dog looks at me and then puts her head down again. The cats, having found shade, are gone. To the Ancients, this time was hot because Sirius was in the sky with the sun; the Dog Star's heat, they thought, enhanced that of Sol. Today, everyone increasingly realizes, it's hotter because we are helping to make it that way. This year, if the pattern we are in holds, we will also face more drought.

This is not the best time to work hard in a garden. Granted, well mulched and sensibly tended plots may look good in August, though given the shortage of water we must conserve every drop, using "gray water" from rain barrels, pasta-cooking pots,

buckets placed beneath leaky faucets or in a thunderstorm, and other sources to keep things green. Still, by mid-August most things look, well, worn out. The droning song of the cicadas invites us to slow down and consider change and eternity, an easy enough task when it is so hot. The cicadas have always, to me, been a first signal that change is coming, and it is a bit sad every year. We may want summer to last forever, even in a year of drought, but summer will pass as everything else does.

At this time, mornings before nine and the magical "cool of the day" of the long summer evening provide the best times for sweat-inducing work. There are also simpler, and rewarding, gardening tasks at hand. Gathering herbs is best done in the early morning, when the essential oils are at their highest levels in the plants. As part of this, I often begin summer days by setting out a pot of "garden tea" in the sun before work. It's simple: a gallon of water in a clear container, with three or four teabags and several sprigs of peppermint and lemon balm, rinsed off and "bruised" to release the oils. I bring in the tea when I return home; it's ready for a scoop of unrefined, or healthful "raw," sugar and a chill-down in the refrigerator.

There is no instant gratification, but as with other aspects of sacred gardening, garden tea helps us better appreciate the good things of the good earth at Her pace, not ours. Today, however, instead of putting a jar in the sun to steep, we might burn gasoline and fight traffic to buy a case of pre-made, and inferior, tea at a superstore, then toss the cans or bottles in the trash instead of recycling them. Nothing hinders us from rushing through every aspect of our lives, including the wonderful Southern tradition of sweetened iced tea.

Allow me to hinder you. Slow down and just be for a while; fall and the ever-present cicadas should remind you that you won't be here forever. Besides, in August it's too bloody hot to do much else except drink tea and think.

At the end of a slow day, early evening is the ideal time to take stock of the wonders from the soil and to "putter" at a few simple chores such as light-duty weeding. Even the non-Christian can then appreciate the poetic wisdom of the authors of Genesis, who had Jehovah stroll about Eden just before darkness fell. It is one of the most moving and poetic moments in the Bible, and it spawned one of the finest gospel songs ever written.

So here is some homework: while the worst of summer's heat grips the land, on days off find a spot of shade outside and watch the plants shimmer in the hazy air. From your chair, sip from a glass of garden tea, and imagine tomatoes turning red in the warm nights that are essential to making them and peppers ripen. Watch those on fools' errands rush by and realize that there is nothing wrong with such gloating. With the hard work of preparing the soil and starting plants long past, there are few other chores to consider until the final bouts of harvesting and canning begin. Then, in the cool of the day, walk among the plants and thank the Maker for them.

Well, if Nietzsche could only worship a god who dances, I can only worship one who gardens. May you be as steadfast as cicadas, and as contented as wet dogs in a shady spot, as the summer winds down.