

FAIR-WEATHER FRIENDS

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Gardening in this part of the country can be difficult in summer. We have too much humidity and heat for the gardener's labors (or pleasure), and too many soil-born pathogens for our favorite plants (but not the weeds).

Rain may fall in buckets during a cool, wet summer such as last year's, or it may not fall at all, as happened the summer before. Our situation might tempt us to long for the cool mornings and nights in New England or the ample rain west of the Cascade Mountains. When I look

in gardening magazines, that is where most of the featured gardens exist. For those of us exasperated by our thickets of wire grass and the presence of more big bugs than in a 50s horror movie, organic practice becomes difficult, a move to a gentler summer climate a dream for 100-degree July days.

Before we pack up our gardening tools and leave the Old Dominion, we might consider whether we're simply being fair-weather friends to our plants and region. I've written many times how gardening has transformative power at the aesthetic, economic, and not least of all the spiritual levels. A good place to begin appreciating what we have is to stop fighting the land and learning how to work *with* it in all its vagaries. By

bringing our notions of a "proper" garden into line with the realities of our region, we can accomplish much within and beyond the garden gate.

This type of garden practice begins by banishing overweening pride. There is certainly enough of that dangerous emotion in our nation and around the world today! I'm fond of literature, and I enjoy pointing to the fate of a few overly proud characters-- Captain Ahab, Mr. Kurtz, Lord and Lady Macbeth--to hint at what happens to the proud in the end. No, fun as it sounds, no arrogant gardener will ever be dragged by squirrels around the garden like Hector around the walls of Troy, but you get my idea. Hubris leads inevitably to disaster, even in the garden. Instead, humility before the earth is the most essential part of what I call Sacred Gardening. I began my own journey by recognizing that the land is greater than me and I belong to it, whatever my mortgage statement says. The land will be here after me, and with some good stewardship, it will be a better place for its next "owner." Of course I can feel proud of both my Type A, well weeded vegetable patch, marching in rows like a small green army, and my spouse's Type B, wild profusion of day lilies, planted with the inherent grace she brings to all things, so that the flowers look as though they have always been there.

Banishing hubris has also saved me a lot of work and has led me away from being only a fair-weather friend to my plants. Here are a few gardening, and spiritual, techniques to try as the days get insanely hot:

- ❖ **Leave the grass tall:** Cutting grass short leads to more weeds germinating and increasing water loss through evaporation and transpiration (essentially, that's the rate at which plants consume water--about 1" weekly, on average, around here)

- ❖ **Water deeply and infrequently:** I try to match the transpiration rate weekly when rain fails us--using a low output sprinkler head that puts out 1" of water over an eight-hour period. Test watering rates by putting a coffee can or pan out. Watering daily for a few minutes (except for some potted plants and seedlings) weakens plants by making the roots come to the surface for a quick baking
- ❖ **Mulch:** mulching well (no more than 3" deep, however) around plantings will save water and reduce weeds
- ❖ **"Weed after Wet":** I do dawn-patrol for weeds, before it gets too hot, after an evening rain or after a day of watering. Pulling is easy in damp soil
- ❖ **Plant natural pest repellants:** Pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*) herb is a great natural mosquito repellant, as is Wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*)
- ❖ **Blow, Winds!:** Don't go into a severe thunderstorm like mad King Lear, but go out in the garden during a summer shower to dance, revel, and enjoy the season! This can be one of the most invigorating, and humbling, experiences around. If you are unsure of your safety or you think the neighbors will see, at least ride a big storm out on an open porch and get a bit wet
- ❖ **Smell the Roses:** It is *not* a moral failure to do less work when the heat is on. Before the bugs come out, spend some time in the shade in your hammock, watching the garden, the weeds, and the craziness of our hurry-scurry world. As the weather turns sticky, I wish you all success gardening, and loafing, this year. Do both in equal measure--that's an old Southern secret we've almost forgotten. Blessed Be.