

Home/Garden

Be prepared — this drought could continue

This year the weather caused big problems for the gardener. First we had heavy, wash-away-the-hills spring rains. Then we suffered hot dry weather punctuated by a torrential storm every month.

This is not ideal growing weather for plants that usually require a couple of damp weeks while seeds germinate and sprout, followed by a weekly inch of rain to keep them growing at their best and healthiest.

The local weather sometimes strikes us as capricious, but it is part of a worldwide system that is ruled by scientific principles. One task we have as gardeners is to figure out how to work with the weather when we can, and ways to circumvent it (to some degree) when we can't.

Recently I was chatting with a climatologist, Jim Gildea, who was explaining why this summer has been so dry. His prediction is that this winter will continue to be dry with little snow, and very cold. He says the drought will continue through next summer when we'll again have long periods of dry weather with periodic severe storms. The reason is that the Arctic has been much colder than usual creating a blocking ridge of high pressure over Iceland.

Similar arctic weather conditions prevailed in 1871 when there was serious drought in the US, especially over the Midwest and plains. That was the summer of the Great Chicago Fire — a fire which took hold be-

Pat Leuchtman



Between The Rows

cause of the severe drought conditions that existed.

There is no pleasure in contemplating a drought, but if we know that we will have to deal with it, we can prepare. One important way of mitigating the effects of a drought is to work on improving our soil, whether it be sandy or heavy, by incorporating organic material. We can build compost piles by using fall leaves, garden residues, collected as we put the garden to bed, grass clippings, weeds, and if we are lucky, animal manures.

There are any number of recipes for compost and they will all work, more or less quickly. Whether made quickly or slowly, compost turns waste into humus, an excellent soil builder and conditioner. It will help a light sandy soil hold moisture and it will help a heavy clay soil drain better. You can't lose.

My compost pile is just that — a pile. Many people build a bin of wood or fencing, or cinder blocks. However, you go about it, your bin or pile should be at least 1 by 3 by 3 feet. It



Recorder / Lucia Russon

can be larger, of course, but no higher than 6 feet or you'll find it too difficult to work with.

The chief ingredients in a compos-

pile are carbon and nitrogen. Layer high carbon materials like grass clippings, leaves, and food wastes with high nitrogen materials like

chicken, cow or horse manure if you have them, or bonemeal or cottonseed meal which you can buy.

If you build your pile with small pieces of organic matter it will break down into compost more quickly.

You also need water. The ideal pile will contain about 50 per cent moisture. You may need to hose down your pile when you build it, and if the weather is very dry, you will need to water it again.

However, if there is a long period of rain, you'll find that the decomposition slows down. One reason a very wet pile won't work as efficiently is that the water forces out another vital element — oxygen. The bacteria that breaks down the organic waste in your pile need air.

You also need to turn your pile from time to time to incorporate air that will keep your pile cooking and decomposing.

Finished compost has a nearly neutral PH and is ideal for any garden. Do not add any lime to your compost pile, even if you are planning on applying it to acid soil. Lime in the compost pile will only cause nitrogen loss, which you do not want.

If your soil is acid, apply lime in the fall and give it time to work over the winter.

The ideal time to apply finished compost that is sweet smelling and resembles dark, rich soil is a couple

of weeks before planting in the spring. If you have partially finished compost in the fall, you can dig it into your soil. By planting time it will have finished decomposing. Your soil will be fertile and rich in the organic matter that will help hold moisture during another dry summer.

Don't pass up those autumn leaves. Use them. Compost them. They provide you with a golden opportunity to enrich your soil.

Now through Sept. 30th

Window Quilt
INSULATING SHADES

**BUY THREE
GET ONE
FREE**