

Yard and Garden – 08-06-2016 - Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

Grumble, grumble, grumble. We've now entered the month of August and with it, expect more hot weather. Yuck! Interestingly, searing temperatures have always been the norm in late summer. I've often heard old timers refer to this time of the year as the "dog days of summer." What an odd expression. Have you ever wondered where such an expression originated and why? I've also noted that we often use the word dog in other odd ways. For example, last week while checking in a 4-H produce exhibit at the Buffalo County Fair, I asked the child's parent how her garden was doing. The woman's response was, "It's gone to the dogs." Assuming gone to the dogs is not good, does that mean "dog days of summer" also has a negative connotation?

If you've ever observed dogs on a hot day, you probably noticed they are not active. Rather, they have a tendency to lie around in the shade and take life easy. You might say they are being a bit lazy. Such an observation is what I've always associated with the expression "dog days of summer." Not totally convinced with my interpretation of the "dog days of summer", I delved deeper. According to a website called wonderopolis.org, I uncovered the following, and I quote from their website.

"The ancient Romans called the hottest, most humid days of summer "diēs caniculārēs" or "dog days." The name came about because they associated the hottest days of summer with the star Sirius. Sirius was known as the "Dog Star" because it was the brightest star in the constellation Canis Major (Large Dog). Sirius also happens to be the brightest star in the night sky.

Sirius is so bright that the ancient Romans thought it radiated extra heat toward Earth. During the summer, when Sirius rises and sets with the Sun, they thought Sirius added heat to the Sun's heat to cause hotter summer temperatures.

For the ancient Romans, the dog days of summer occurred from about July 24 to around August 24. Over time, though, the constellations have drifted somewhat. Today, *The Old Farmer's Almanac* lists the traditional timing of the dog days of summer as being July 3 until August 11th."

The fact is, although “dog days of summer” are usually the hottest days of the year, they really don’t have anything to do with dogs or the dog star Sirius. All this heat is in direct relationship with the tilt of the earth on its axis toward the sun. During the summer, we, who live in the Northern Hemisphere, receive a more direct angle of sunlight throughout the day. This translates into hotter days for the summer compared to the other three seasons. It also explains why the “dog days of summer” in the Southern Hemisphere occur in late January to early March.

Now that I’ve cleared the air as to the meaning of “dog days of summer”, rather than complaining about the heat, I encourage my readers to relax a bit. Like dogs on a hot summer’s day, make every effort to stay cool. During the heat of day, why not find a shady spot to rest, or better yet, stay indoors and enjoy air conditioning.

However, while seeking shelter from the summer’s heat, I share this last thought. This too shall pass. Summer will soon vanish, giving rise to autumn, and then winter with its freezing temperatures will return. When this happens, rather than grumbling about the heat, I have a hunch most of us will then be longing for the return of the “dog days of summer.” Let’s face it, contentment is short lived.