



How the Heat Affects Gardening

I doubt I need to inform anyone that trying to garden in this heat is challenging, at best. Some symptoms of heat and drought are pretty obvious, like dormant cool season turf, but others are a little less evident.

Not only are tree and shrub leaves susceptible to leaf scorch, fruit and vegetables are as well. If you see a tan spot on items as tomato or pepper that looks slightly sunken, or 'water-soaked,' chances are good it's caused by sun scald. The fruit/vegetable is fine to eat, just cut out the spot. There's not a whole lot you can do to prevent sunscald in weather like we're having, but you can reduce its occurrence by always watering at the base of the plant, and making sure you don't over-prune leaves and branches that provide a little shade for the fruits.

High heat for extended periods can also cause bitterness in cucumbers, and increase the likelihood of blossom end rot on tomatoes, as well as squash, watermelon, and even peppers. Many people who grew potatoes this season have also noticed an earlier than usual dieback of the above ground plant. If this happens to you, make sure to harvest the potatoes in the ground as soon as possible. They are likely to rot if left in the very warm soil we currently have. By the way, soil temperatures in Dodge County range from 87-89 degrees right now (<http://cropwatch.unl.edu/web/cropwatch/cropwatchsoiltemperature>)!

The effect of long hot and dry conditions can also adversely affect fruit. Peaches will be slower to ripen, and almost all fruit will be smaller than normal. Sugar content will be lower, which results in a lower quality fruit. The length of time fruit will keep in storage is also reduced, and as soon as fruits ripen, make sure to harvest promptly.

What can you do to help your plants through the heat? Mulch is probably the best thing to add if you don't already have some down. Not only does mulch help the soil around plants retain moisture, it also helps regulate the soil temperatures. Hardwood shredded mulch, newspapers, or lawn clippings (those not recently treated with herbicides) are all fine options. Just mulch!

Since it is August, now would normally be the time to start thinking about fall gardening. However, with the high heat and low soil moisture, it is best to put that off for a time, at least until temperatures decrease for a length of time. Many vegetable seeds planted for a fall harvest, won't sprout in extremely warm temperatures. Even if they do, the heat and drought will cause unnecessary stress on the new plants and is likely to kill them. Once the temperatures cool, make sure there is enough season left by checking your seed packets for the 'days to maturity' or 'days to harvest.' For example, 'Black Seeded Simpson' lettuce takes 45 days from seed to harvest. So if we have a short fall and go straight to winter, we might not have enough growing days of appropriate temperatures. On the other hand, if temperatures cool around the last week of August, you sow lettuce seed then, you could expect a lettuce harvest by mid- October. Sure we could have a snow then, but more likely we'll have typical, cooler fall days. Hopefully!

Natalia Bjorklund is an Extension Education for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, serving Dodge County. You can contact her by stopping by the office here in Fremont at 1206 W. 23rd, emailing at nbjorklund3@unl.edu, or calling the office at 402.727.2775