

Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks and Home Horticulture

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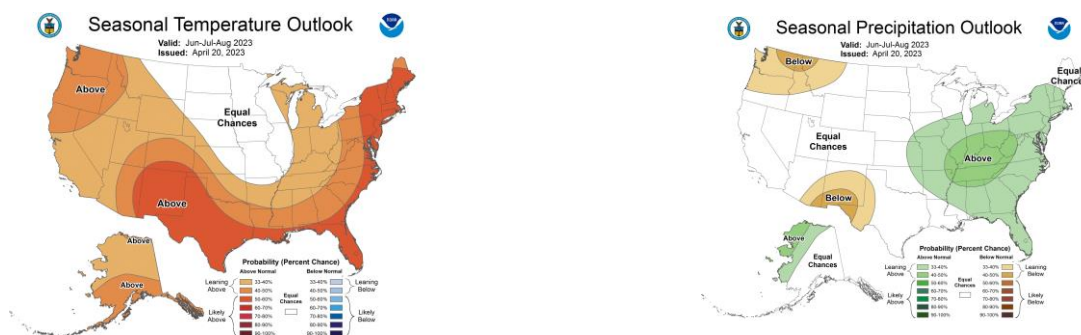
Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks and Home Horticulture is an online newsletter designed to provide citizens of Allen County and northeastern Indiana with up-to-date information about Horticulture and home issues, written in a lighthearted style! To subscribe, send an email to kemeryr7@frontier.com.

Weather

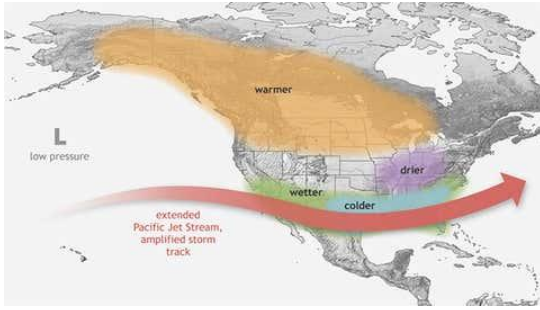
The Climate Prediction Center, a branch of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, says there's a **62% chance** of El Niño developing by July 2023. El Niño, a close cousin of La Niña, develops when the Pacific Ocean along the equator warms up to above-average temperatures. Record global heat has been observed during previous transitions from La Niña to El Niño. After a lengthy period of La Niña in which the oceans absorbed large amounts of heat, a strong El Niño developed in 2015 and 2016 and contributed to the hottest average global temperatures ever observed in 2016. Most El Niño's hit their peak in late fall or winter, and thus have their strongest influence on weather patterns in the colder months of the year.

The classic El Niño winter is rather warm from Alaska into western and central Canada, then into the northern tier of states from the Pacific Northwest to the western Great Lakes.

It tends to be colder and wetter than average through much of the southern U.S., particularly from Texas to the Carolinas. Some cities in the Southwest, Southern Plains and mid-Atlantic have their snowiest winters during El Niño.



The Climate Prediction continues to forecast wetter than average conditions for most of the summer. To me, the most recent weather (warm and dry) makes me nervous. I am reminded of El Niño years where the summer weather has been hot and dry. I still remember the El Niño summer of 1988 where we had a normal rainy spring, and then it did not rain from May through September. Landscapes turned parched and brown, It was ugly.



Other factors can and do influence winter weather patterns, including the polar vortex. But if this El Niño develops and especially if it becomes strong, this may be the general picture to expect next winter.



Rhododendrons

Everyone loves rhododendrons. These plants are best suited for the southern U.S. and be very finicky to grow in our area. Many plants purchased in the spring are dead by mid-summer. If they had cemeteries only for rhodos, they would be full to the brim. Most Rhododendrons grow as shrubs, and the majority of them occur either on the slopes of the very deep valleys that border the eastern Himalayas and southeastern Tibet, or in the mountain ranges that form the backbones of the archipelago stretching between mainland Asia and Australia - the islands of Java, Sumatra, Borneo, New Guinea, and the Philippines. The genus name is derived from the Ancient

Greek words “*rhodon*”, which means “rose” and “*dendron*” meaning “tree”, and it literally translates to “Rose Tree”.

Rhododendrons and azaleas are often confused. Azaleas were once considered a separate genus of plants, but they were reclassified as genetically similar to rhododendrons relatively recently. Thanks again, meddling taxonomists..... People tend to think of rhododendrons as large evergreen plants with big clusters of blooms and associate azaleas with smaller leaves and shorter plant habits. Azaleas in particular tend to be short-lived in our climate and poor soils.

Rhododendron plants, like many other plants in the Ericaceae family, prefer acidic soils. Many of the evergreen types can be susceptible to burn in winter where they are exposed. To prevent this, plant evergreen types in sheltered areas, avoiding southern exposures. Keep them sheltered from drying winter winds as well. In our area, eastern exposures are the best place to plant rhodos.

The ideal soil pH for rhododendron plants is somewhere between 4.5 and 6.0. You can amend the soils with peat moss, compost, and other soil acidifiers to keep them happy. Generally, one should apply about 1-2 lbs. of pelletized sulfur around plants each year.

Rhododendrons also appreciate soil that has organic matter. Amend soils before planting with Canadian sphagnum peat moss. Rhodos demand good drainage, so plant them a bit above grade, and avoid wet areas.

Gardeners who live in areas with deer may have a problem growing rhododendron. Deer love to munch on the leaves of the plant. One might need to use a taste repellant such as Deer Away.

Evergreen types may begin to curl their leaves during the winter. This is a physiological response to dry winter weather. By curling their leaves, they are protecting themselves from cold temperatures and desiccating winds.



One of my favorite rhododendrons for this area are PJM hybrid rhododendrons. These rhodos are better adapted for our area -with better chances of survival. Most are more compact shrubs, approximately 4-5 feet in height.

Another favorite is Korean Rhododendron, *Rhododendron mucronulatum*, a very rare and unusual shrub that is one of the first plants to flower in the spring. This shrub also reaches about 5 feet in height, and the early flowers are spectacular.



Walking in the Rain

When was the last time you have walked in the rain just for the fun and joy of it?

For me it was when I was 7 years old. It was spring, and I had major cabin fever. The rainy weather had continued for days on end.

Finally my mother had enough of me moping around our house.

She dressed me from head to foot in a rubber raincoat and boots and sent me out into the rainy world.

I explored the lakeshore and fields and enjoyed the silence of early spring in northern Indiana. When I returned to our house on the lake, my mother made me a cup of hot chocolate-not the kind from a packet they make nowadays – the real stuff – made on the stove with milk and real chocolate. It was rare for us kids to get hot chocolate in those days.

It was what I needed to revive my cramped spirit. The pitter-patter of the raindrops was music for my soul.

One late fall day in 2006 my eventual wife Lynette and I were sitting in her house located in Steuben County. It was raining outside. It had been raining for a few days in succession. We sat in the darkness listening to the raindrops fall on her roof. My spirit- which had been broken for so many years – was mending- but rainy days were often bad days- when I remembered the past - filled with so much hardship, sorrow, regret – and unhappiness.

I must explain that Lynette was “Rammy”. “Rammy” meaning she liked to be occupied. Since she was a fix-it girl whose knowledge could rival most “tough” guys in a hardware store; often she dinked around her house and property on various projects. “Rammy” would listen to raindrops for a while, but then action of some sort must occur.

“Want to go for a walk?” Lynette asked me with an anxious look on her face – thinking I would probably nix the idea since we were supposed to be grown up adults. I thought for a minute. I remembered the long ago walk in the rain from my childhood. “Sure”, I said.

We walked for an hour or two in the forests and hills near her home. We watched the raindrop's playful dance on the water of the lake. We listened to the silence of the deep forest where the raindrops had a difficult time making it to the ground beneath the trees.

We returned to the house (completely drenched) where Lynette made a cup of hot chocolate for us both – not hot chocolate from a packet- but the real thing- made with hot milk on the stove. She handed me the cup of chocolate. I looked at her and burst into tears. She began to cry also. “Are you crying because you are happy?” she asked. I nodded in assent; unable to speak.

I was a child again. That walk in the rain was just what I needed to revive my wounded spirit. The pitter-patter of raindrops was music for my wounded soul.

Clover Mites

Material compiled from Penn State University - University of Missouri



Clover mites differ from many pests in that they prefer cooler weather. Clover mite activity increases as temperatures start to drop, during which time they pay homage to their name by feasting on clovers, over-fertilized grass and many other plants. In fact, clover mites eat more than 200 different plant species, including some flowers. Their activity peaks in the cooler, early spring months when they can become the greatest nuisance to homeowners. Eggs tend to hatch after a rain. The mites are frequently encountered on windowsills on the sunny side of homes and will move about at a

relatively rapid pace. Mites located in the vicinity of buildings may climb the exterior walls and gain entrance around windows or doors. If the mites are overwintering under the building siding or within the wall voids, they may become active and enter the living areas rather than exiting to the outside.

Once the hotter summer weather arrives, clover mites will lay eggs and become latent. In the northeastern U.S., for example, they may go into a dormant state around May and remain that way until September. Any eggs that are laid in fall will overwinter until hatching the following spring. These eggs are often positioned in the cracks and crevices of a home's exterior or between walls, creating issues for homeowners upon hatching.



Home infestations are most severe when sudden changes in weather or habitat occur. Populations typically move indoors in autumn when the plants that clover mites feed on start to perish, causing these pests to invade in high numbers — even by hundreds of thousands. Additional infestations occurring in the spring are typically driven by the sudden growth of lush vegetation around a home's perimeter, which is especially palatable to clover mites.

When smashed, adult clover mites leave behind a red stain, especially on items such as curtains, wallpaper, rugs and other furniture that are lighter in color. As such, clover mites found in the home should be vacuumed up instead of crushed.

There are steps that homeowners can take to prevent clover mite infestations indoors. For starters, thick vegetation or plants that are known to attract clover mites should be removed in an 18 to 24-inch band around

the perimeter of the home. Likewise, homeowners should inspect the structure, including the foundation, window frames and siding for cracks that may serve as entry points. These spaces should be properly sealed to prevent clover mites from laying eggs or entering the home. Within the home, the best control method is to use a strong vacuum, which also will prevent the mites from staining surfaces. It is not necessary to chemically treat mites within the home because they will die there within a few days from dehydration.

Use an over-the-counter outdoor insecticide labeled to control mites around the home. Some outdoor products such as neem are labeled as organic. Orange Guard may also be used as a temporary control. Create a barrier by spraying 2 feet high on the wall and 2 feet wide on the ground along the base of the house below where clover mites are seen inside. Spray the foundation and outside walls. Repeat this application as needed throughout the season when clover mites are entering the house.

Kale — *Compiled from the Farmer's Almanac*

Kale is one of the most popular vegetables grown by gardeners. Part of the popularity is all the hype about kales and how nutritious they are to eat. Kale smoothies are a hot item. I have to be honest, I am not thrilled by kale, as it can be rather fibrous to eat – and kale smoothies can be rather a trial to consume every day. I always compare different foods to the best pizza I have ever eaten – like from Tom's Campus Corner (closed long ago) near the campus of Trine University in Angola Indiana. Simply the best..as Tina Turner would say. Kale loses big time in this taste comparison.



Kale is one of the most nutritious vegetables you can grow. It's crammed with vitamins and powerful antioxidants, and it tastes delicious (according to Kale believers). Kale is a hardy cool season crop which grows best in spring and fall, tolerating frost and even snow.

A biennial (2-year) plant, kale produces leaves in the first year, and then, in the next year (or sometimes late in the first year), it will form a flower stalk. The stalk forms flowers and then seeds. Once the seeds mature, the plant dies.

Full sun and fertile, well-drained soil produce the fastest growing and most tender leaves, though kale will tolerate partial shade as well. Add plenty of compost to the ground before planting and if your soil isn't especially rich, top up its fertility by working in nitrogen-rich amendments such as blood meal, cottonseed meal, or composted manure into the ground before planting.

Kale tastes best when plants grow rapidly and mature before the heat of summer (before temperatures exceed 75°F/24°C) or after fall frosts occur. Young plants are not seriously damaged by temperatures down to 25°F/-4°C. Mature plants are extremely hardy and can withstand very cold temperatures. However, hot temperatures will slow growth and cause bitter flavor.

- For spring: Whether direct seeding into the soil or transplanting start plants from the nursery, you can plant 4 to 6 weeks before the average last spring frost. Seeds will germinate at soil temperatures as low as 40°F/4°C.
- For fall: Select early maturing cultivars and direct seed in August. The cool fall weather really brings out the sweet, nutty flavor of kale which can withstand hard frosts (25–28°F) without experiencing damage.

- When planting, add fertilizer (1-1/2 cups of 5-10-10 fertilizer per 25 feet of row) into the top 3 to 4 inches of soil. If you fertilize with compost, apply no more than 1 inch of well-composted organic matter per 100 square feet of garden area.
- Plant seeds 1/4 to 1/2 of an inch deep, 1 inch apart, in rows 18 to 30 inches apart.
- If you're setting out young plants (transplants), plant them at the depth at which they are growing in the container, spaced 12 inches apart, in rows 18 to 30 inches apart.
- It's important to keep kale well-watered and fertilized. If rain is inconsistent, provide 1 to 1.5 inches of water each week (about 1 gallon per square foot).
- Side-dress as needed with a high-nitrogen fertilizer.
- Mulch the soil to keep down the weeds, retain moisture, and keep kale cool. Kale growth can slow if plants are stressed (too hot or cold, inadequate water, pests or disease).
- One can also apply shade cloth over the kale during summer to help keep the plants cool.
- To guarantee a supply of mature leaves through winter, mulch heavily after the first hard freeze

Popular Kale Varieties

- **Red Russian' (or 'Russian Red')**: heirloom; oak leaf-shape, gray-green leaves with deep-purple veins and stem; an early crop
- **'Lacinato' (aka 'Lacinato Blue', 'Tuscan', 'Black Palm Tree', or 'Cavil Nero')**: heirloom, straplike leaves up to 2 feet long on plants that resemble small palm trees; heat tolerant and very cold-hardy.
- **'True Siberian'**: large, frilly, blue-green leaves; cold-hardy; pick all winter in some areas
- **'Vates Blue Curled'**: hardy variety that is slow to bolt and does not yellow in cold weather. Its eponymous leaves reach 12 to 14 inches on 15-inch plants.
- **'Winterbor'**: resembles 'Vates', with 24-inch leaves on 2- to 3-foot-tall plants; baby leaves can be harvested at 28 days; frost-tolerant.
- Kale is ready to harvest when the leaves are about the size of your hand. Pick about a fistful of outer leaves per harvest, but no more than one-third of the plant at one time.
- Avoid picking the terminal bud (at the top center of the plant), which helps to maintain the plant's productivity.
- Kale will continue growing until temperatures reach 20°F/-7°C. Do not stop harvesting: A "kiss" of frost makes it even sweeter.
- To extend the harvest, protect it with row covers or tarps. Or, to create a makeshift cover of old blankets propped up by hay bales.
- Kale is not native to North America. Current varieties are descended from wild cabbage.
- Farmers have long grown kale as fodder for farm animals, including cattle and sheep.
- To avoid pest and disease issues, do not plant kale or other cole crops in the same location more than once every 3 or 4 years.
- The chill of a moderate frost or light snow improves the flavor of kale.

Potato and Kale Soup

Ingredients

4 strips bacon, diced
 4 potatoes, peeled and diced
 1 onion, chopped
 5 cloves garlic, chopped
 6 cups low-sodium chicken stock

2 cups firmly packed chopped kale leaves
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/8 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Instructions

In a soup pot, cook bacon until crisp. Remove bacon with a slotted spoon and set aside on paper towels to drain.

Add potatoes, onions, and garlic to bacon drippings in soup pot and cook for 5 minutes. Add stock, kale, salt, and pepper and simmer for an hour, or until potatoes are soft.

Transfer soup to a blender or food processor and puree in batches. Return to soup pot and thin with stock if necessary.

Serve topped with bacon. There is the key- bacon makes anything taste better.

Disease and Insect Forecast

Everything has been slowed down by the cold rainy weather we experienced in April. Even flowering trees and shrubs appeared drab and depressed in the sullen rainy sun-absent weather.

Insect and disease development has also been slowed since insects especially are controlled by degree days – the colder the weather the longer it takes for insects and disease to appear.

However there is still plenty of time for pests to appear in an effort to ruin our gardens and landscapes.

I would expect to see decent amounts of apple scab and fireblight – two diseases which can affect flowering crabapples and apple and pear trees. The reason I make this prediction is that both diseases require prolonged periods of wetness when the leaves and flowers emerge in the spring.



With apple scab, leaves will develop brownish irregular spots and blotches as the weather warms up. By Mid-June many leaves just turn brown and fall to the ground. Defoliated trees cause great concern for homeowners, who want to spray the trees to stop the disease. Unfortunately it is too late to spray. Take a deep breath and be grateful that the trees

will not die. Maybe next year you can spray a fungicide when growth is about one half inch in length – continuing sprays weekly until time stands still- or a meteorite hits the earth,



Fireblight on the other hand can be a devastating bacterial disease which infects apples and pears. If you had been trudging around in the rain and mud in your landscape, you might have noticed flowers and flower clusters that appeared water-soaked, then drooping and shriveling, turning brown or black. Droplets of

cream to light-yellow colored ooze would appear along infected branches, shoots or fruit during humid weather or after a rain. As the weather warms up, young leaves and shoots wilt and bend downward forming the shape of a hook. Trees with multiple infected shoots may appear scorched by fire. To manage fire blight, prune trees to remove infected branches before the disease kills the tree. If fireblight becomes an issue on a flowering pear – then one has to decide on whether to treat an invasive tree or reduce the population. Hmmm.....

Sterilize pruning shears with a 10% bleach solution or other disinfectant after each cut. Have fun-it will be a glorious summer. Some experts predict this summer could be the hottest on record. Purchase sunscreen and personal fans and neck coolers. Garden naked if possible -avoid contact with the neighbors.

Hoggles – Demented Cat Logic



To my caregiver: *I appreciate your effort to make me a healthy feline, but let's ixnay the kale smoothies for lunch—my fur is turning green, and it's not a good look.*

Watering Tips

In case the Climate Prediction Center is totally wrong in their forecast for wet weather this summer, I am providing a few tips on watering in an El Nino summer.

Water in the morning to waste less water and help prevent disease in the garden and landscape. It is a myth that watering in the heat of the day results in the water burning holes in plant foliage. After all my years of gardening, I have never seen plant leaves smoldering after watering. Cold water on hot plants can cause stress, and of course some water is lost due to evaporation.

Existing and mature trees and shrubs generally can survive periods of drought. They might look stressed, but most will be ok.

Dig down at least six inches near vegetables and flowers in your landscape. If the soil is dry at that depth when you dig, then water until the soil at that depth is moist.

Studies of rainfall have shown that most plants need about an inch of rainfall per week to do their best. One can have a rain gauge in the garden to measure this. Or let the Internet do this for you. There are apps one can install that will tell you how much rainfall you received any given day. Many end look like “real” rain gauges. Isn't it amazing?

Studies have also shown that about 9 gallons of water fall on a rooftop area when an inch of rainfall occurs. We can use this info to determine how much water to apply to various plants in a drought period. Generally newly planted trees and large shrubs need at least 5 gallons of water per week to grow and flourish. Every newly planted perennial need about 3 gallons of water each week to do well. Of course, if we are lucky enough to receive an inch of rainfall in any given week – we don't need to water at all. Sit in the shade and drink a favorite libation while listening to neighbors mow their lawns.

It helps to determine how long it takes to fill a gallon jug with your watering hose. So simply set a timer, fill a gallon jug, and then you will know how long it takes. If it takes 45 seconds to fill the jug, then it will take about 3 ½ minutes to apply 5 gallons of water to a newly planted tree or large shrub. This gives one plenty of time per plant to ponder one's existence in today's challenging world.

There are lots of ways to water landscape and garden plants. Overhead or ground level sprinklers are used frequently by gardeners. I prefer the tall whirligig sprinklers the best for my garden, since many plants are tall. One can set a small open container -like a food storage container – out in the garden to measure the amount of water delivered by the sprinkler. It actually takes a surprising amount of time to deliver one inch of water to a garden. I have tried to use the ground level sprinklers that one can set for specific areas. These sprinklers frustrate me because they clog and break easily. I have found it almost impossible to place and adjust them without becoming absolutely drenched. After a while, they will loosen the soil near them and spray water directly in the ground near them or straight up in the air – drenching everything that doesn't need water.

One can try to use drip irrigation or hose “tapes” to deliver water to plants. These need constant resetting and often a daydreaming gardener (see previous) will cut them when weeding or planting. Some very exacting gardeners will install drip irrigation using tubes and emitters to each plant in a garden. The garden can look like plastic snakes have invaded, and once again a daydreaming gardener can dislodge or injury the system.

Any system is better than no system when all gardeners do is apply small amounts of water to a garden encouraging shallow root systems which result in stressed weakened plants.

Mulching around plants is always a good way to conserve water and to keep plant roots cooler. Just be careful not to pile mulch around the base of plants and to keep mulch depths of about 3 inches. Mulch choices are up to you, I prefer cedar mulches because they last longer, reflect heat away from plants, and help to repel some insects away from plants. Pine needle mulch is great to use also.



I have recently transplanted large shrubs into a landscape. It is always difficult to dig plants with enough soil and a root system. Whenever I am concerned about transplant success, I use a root stimulator to help matters. Root stimulators should contain IBA – or indole butyric acid – which promotes rooting. Most contain small amounts of higher phosphorous fertilizer also. I transplanted a golden raintree to the same landscape that had lost all its foliage to a late freeze. It had no leaves or growth at all. I used the root stimulator and a week later new growth had appeared, with new buds appearing on the trunk and at the base. It is a valuable product to have. I use the Fertilome product which is available at most Do-it centers and garden supply stores. It is also available on Amazon.

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