

Rapid Seasonal Shifts

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Early this year I heard someone say, "I really hope we get to have a spring this year." I hear this frequently and I often think that individuals don't really understand seasonal weather patterns in the Great Plains. Okay, in all fairness, right after Mother's Day we did have an abrupt shift from May to July. While we may not like it, it really isn't that uncommon to have weather extremes like this. It's the curse of living in the middle of a continent where the strongest weather pattern wins and we really have no tempering mechanism like mountains or an ocean!

While the weather can be tough on us, it can be tougher on plants around our homes and farms. Wheat does not like temperatures above 85 or 90 degrees. In fact, it's normal response to those kinds of temperatures is the initiation of senescence, which is a fancy way to say, the plant starts to die. At a time when the wheat should be focusing on blooming and creating full plump kernels, it wants to die. Yields will likely be impacted. Abnormally warm weather also warms the soil quicker and a lot of weeds start growing like gang-busters! Weeds can quickly get out ahead of burn down herbicides if you also don't use a good soil residual herbicide as well.

Around the lawn and garden, plants are going to be stressing and stressing heavily with these summer like temperatures suddenly in May. Lawns may be the first to show the stress IF we don't receive at least an inch of rain a week. Moisture stressed lawns will tend to turn a bluish green color and just stop growing. While heat in another month will do this also, many of the grass plants are still trying to send up seed heads and so the stress may look a little different than your typical summer stress. If you have a lawn sprinkler system, the worst thing you could do is to run it a little bit every day. All this does is moistens the top inch or two of soil which means that will be the only place your grass grows roots. That does not make for a drought resilient lawn. You are better off to only water once or twice a week but apply more water each time so you are soaking up at least the top six inches of soil.

Evergreens, like spruces and pines, are shallow rooted and can dry out before you ever know it. A slow soaking with an open hose once a month, in the absence of rain, can prevent a lot of problems. Junipers/cedars are more drought hardy but may still benefit from occasional slow soakings.

Vegetables in the garden and flowers in flower beds or pots, that were just planted or transplanted recently, may be the most stressed. We know that a little stress is good for young plants as it does encourage them to root deeper quicker, but you don't want that stress to get severe. Since just about any plant will look wilted in the middle of the afternoon when it's hot, the best time to check is first thing in the morning. If plants are wilted at that time, then they are likely quite dry and need to be watered! Slow deep soakings are the best for transplants.

If you are trying to get recently seeded crops out of the ground then frequent light waterings to keep that seed zone moist are in order. Once the plants have germinated and are growing well then you can back off to once or twice a week irrigations in the absence of about one inch of rain per week. It is essential to pay attention to the plants. Many homeowners like to water by the calendar, but the calendar doesn't know how hot it's been or how humid or windy it's been or if it's been sunny or cloudy or if it's rained. All of these things need to be considered when making watering decisions so pay attention to the plants!