



This Summer's Surprises **Dianne Westlake**

This has been a year of surprises in our garden. We were told that this summer was supposed to be hot and dry. What a shock it has been – rain, rain and more rain! But the weather has not been our only surprise.

All this precipitation has been really good for people to do not like watering gardens. In our case, we do not water because we are on a well. What a rare experience! In previous years, I have rationed the water we collected, but this year our rain barrels have been filled all season. When I have needed to use this water for watering containers, they have been refilled within a day or two.

For the most part, the plants in our garden have loved this summer's conditions. We have had the odd problem with insects but nothing of devastating proportions. Many of our plants have expanded their territory, fighting it out with neighbours for space.

Slugs and snails have also thrived. Late night forays, armed with a spray bottle filled with one part ammonia to nine parts water have helped keep the slug population under control.

The weeds have liked these conditions too, growing larger than in previous years. It seems that they can grow to gargantuan proportion overnight but the soft soil has made it easier to pull these unwanted plants.

Recently I was reminded that there have been some pretty spectacular things happening out there in the garden – some as a result of the conditions and some as a result of the maturing garden.

We have successfully grown several varieties of hardy hibiscus. You may have noticed these plants around the city. They bloom in late August and September, many producing dinner plate sized flowers in colours ranging from white to pink to red. Many have a contrasting centre or interesting veining.

We have a hibiscus called Copper King which was chosen for its dark foliage colour as opposed to the flowers. A good thing because for the past three years that is all we have seen. The plant is barely three feet tall and because it was not flowering I considered moving it to a less prominent location, as it does like a bit more moisture. What a show this year – huge delicate papery flowers that are light pink with red eye! When the sun spotlights them, you cannot help but notice them from a distance.

This year the Joe Pye Weed achieved its full height. More than six feet tall, it is a beacon to passing butterflies. Situated at the back of a wide bed, they add a burst of colour that draws the eye. Next year, it will have to be controlled as the clump has expanded and is heading for the peonies.

In a bed that is facing our neighbour, there grows a Daylily that is fluorescent orange. An arresting colour, but this year, the clump has expanded in size and the number of flowers has dramatically increased. What a wonderful sight – I hope our neighbours enjoy them. One bright plant that I can see from the house is a ligularia. With more blooms than ever, it almost hurts your eyes in the sunlight.

The Annabelle Hydrangea has put up a huge number of branches with enormous flower heads so large that many are falling over. Fortunately the ornamental grasses and other plants are able to support the weight.

For the first time, we have fruit on our hardy Kiwi vines. Kiwis require a male and a female plant to produce fruit and although we had purchased one of each sex five years ago, we were beginning to believe that one of the plants had been mislabeled. The vines look great growing over an arbour and provide shade so we were accepting of the fact that there would not likely be fruit in our future. Now the challenge will be to harvest the fruit before the birds, squirrels and chipmunks beat us to it.

We had a huge maple tree taken down earlier in the summer. The shade garden that was suddenly located in full sun has done amazingly well, probably due to the amount of water and nutrients that are now available. Heucheras are thriving and although the Hosta leaves have had some burning, for the most part have survived. Many of the plants will be moved as a new plan evolves for the area.

One surprise I wish we not had was the hailstorm that swept through the area. It was fairly localized and short in duration but did manage to decimate the leaves of the cannas and hostas. The cannas were cut to ribbons. Removing the worst of the leaves has encouraged new growth. Unfortunately there was so much damage to the hostas that we have had to leave the unsightly evidence of the storm. If the hail did not actually punch through, it scraped the epidermis resulting in blemishes. Between slugs and hail, these plants have taken a beating but they are tough and will come back bigger and better next year.

When I am on the hunt for slugs or pulling those weeds I try to think about the positives!
Every year has its unique conditions. You cannot control Mother Nature, and remember
the gardener's motto – 'There is always next year!'

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