Working with the Weather

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July 9, 2021

Our general climate is one of the best in the world

Weather and gardening are related in many ways, and though you can't control the weather, you can do things to deal with the weather that comes your way. The Pacific Northwest has varied and fascinating weather. It is not all gray, cloudy, rainy days as much of the country seems to believe. In fact, we have stretches of summer that go 80 to 90 days without measurable precipitation as opposed to the East Coast where it rains a lot in the summer. What the Puget Sound region does not get is high, prolonged summer heat. Even Maine gets more heat units and that is why growing roses and tomatoes is a challenge here.

Our general climate is one of the best in the world for growing a wide variety of plants. It is one of the reasons people choose to live here. Skagit County lies mostly in USDA zone 8A that only considers average low temperature; it has nothing to do with heat or precipitation.

First, what are climate, weather, and microclimate? Climate is the average weather conditions at a place over a period of many years.

The world Koppen-Geiger climate classification map is a fascinating way to look at the types of climate by latitude. Large bodies of water and mountains affect climate as well. Skagit Valley to King County is classified as a Mediterranean climate, whereas Whidbey Island and Anacortes are considered oceanic because of their slightly cooler summers, less rainfall and more wind. This affects what grows well. The San Juan Islands and Sequim are considered deserts based on rainfall averages.

Weather is the day-to-day conditions that tend to be mild here, not the extremes. But we do get huge extremes occasionally like the 1962 Columbus Day storm. We have such varied weather, because the Cascade Mountains and the Pacific Ocean are close to each other, and they meet over our heads.

Microclimates are those small areas, perhaps in your yard, where the weather is a little different. It may be, because it is down in a hollow with damp, deep soil or in an area that is high and dry, exposed to sun or wind all day.

Soil and weather in combination give plants needed light, moisture, nutrients, and air to grow. Plant roots get their air (oxygen) and nutrients within the soil. If heavy rains saturate the soil, they may compact it enough that the plant roots are deprived of air. The same thing happens if you walk on saturated soil. This is bad news for the plant. Heavy rains can also leach out

nitrogen, essential for plant growth, but you should put off adding nitrogen to your garden until spring when your plants are starting to grow. Our heavy rains in fall and winter can cause flooding, so pay attention to your garden's drainage patterns. Roots too wet for too long, causes many plants to die.

A wide variety of weather systems in the Skagit Valley can potentially wreak havoc with the gardening process. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardener.*

Some plants need more sun than others. Read the plant tag. Plants in the shade usually don't bloom as fully or set fruit as well as those in the sun. Most vegetables need at least 6–8 hours of full sun to mature. It would be wise to add 2 or 3 weeks to the time the seed packet says the plant is mature. Plants simply take longer to mature in the PNW. You may need to add extra protection in the spring and fall such as mulching and row covers to keep plants a bit warmer.

Weather affects soil temperature that determines when a seed will germinate. Too cold and the seed may rot. Different plants have different temperatures at which their seed germinates. Corn, beans, and squash are examples of crops that need warm soil. Some seeds can be started indoors and transplanted outside when the soil warms; others are best directly seeded. Locally, the last frost is usually around April 15, although it was later this year. Our first frost in the fall is usually late October. Harvest your winter squash and pumpkins by then.

Weather affects plant diseases, especially fungal diseases that thrive on cool springs that are damp and high in humidity. Diseases are specific about what temperatures the spores or bacteria will begin to appear and spread. Once they are out and about, there is no going back. You must

prevent the disease from getting started in the first place. Growing tomatoes in a space with overhead covering can prevent late blight, for example. Good garden sanitation (like picking up all diseased debris so that disease does not overwinter in the soil) and adequate air circulation are essential. Grow varieties that are resistant to various diseases and take a long cool growing season.

Weather affects wildlife because it affects their habitat and food sources. Slugs and snails are prime examples Just remember while most of the slugs and snails we see are non-native, the banana slug is one of the good guys. They won't eat your lettuce or strawberries. They eat decaying woodland debris.

This may be a Mediterranean climate, but this is not the Riviera. The weather section of the newspaper daily lists growing degree days from March through October. This shows the accumulation of heat units and helps farmers in many ways. The average for Skagit Valley is approximately 1400 heat units, one of the lowest in the nation.

You can do your part to keep your plants healthy. "Right plant, right place" means you place a plant that is right for this climate in a spot that meets its needs, and you give it the care it needs to get off to a good start. Plants want to live, but not everywhere.

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RESOURCES:

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- "Sustainable Landscapes and Gardens: good science -practical application." Dr.Linda Chalker-Scott. GFG Publishing,Inc. 2009.
- The Sunset Western Garden Book. Kathleen Brenzel, editor. Time Home Entertainment Inc .2012.
- The WSU Master Gardener Training Manual