

Weather

Once upon a time, up until about the 1980s, rain in Inverleigh was predicted by the movement of ants, the flying over of black cockatoos, the look of the clouds, the colour of the sky at sunrise and sunset, or by a 'feeling' which could be in particular joints or simply the result of the sum of a life's experience in relation to rain events. Likewise, frost could be anticipated by a clear sky and the feel of the chill late in the afternoon. Now we tend to rely on internet weather sites such as the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) site, along with the town specific MetEye, where we can check out the wind at different hours as well as rainfall and temperature.

The seven day forecasts are so useful because they give you time to prepare your garden for the weather. High winds later in the week means pop out and securing loose items now, frost means look out the covers and pouring rain means enjoy some gardening books, dream and make plans. It does seem to us that the weather has been 'unseasonable' of late. Do you recall last September/October, when hot days interrupted spring? January was mild with considerable rain and the roadsides not as dried up and brown as usual. Autumn thought that a half-hearted effort would do before handing over to unrelenting cold, rain, rain, wind, rain – on and on – from the middle of April. Now we are in winter, we have had some T-shirt days and a week of fine dry weather has been forecast.

Knowing the range of weather you can expect is important to gardeners. It is sensible to match the majority of our plantings to our situations – growing the range of plants, including indigenous ones, which cope with our climatic conditions readily. Selecting others, which originate from places where the weather is fairly close to ours, may need more careful placement but will usually be successful. Other plants, ones that do not like our natural conditions can still be grown if their needs are met by modifying parts of your environment or looking for microclimates within your garden. An example would be making use of the extra warmth stored in thermal masses such as brick walls and water tanks to keep the temperature warmer for frost sensitive plants. Another good tip is to plant frost sensitive plants to the west of a group of shrubs, enabling some protection from the other plants and some time to thaw out before the morning sun hits them.

A sign of the change to cold weather and the turning of the seasons is the autumn foliage on deciduous trees. The ornamental pears, nashis, crab apples, liquid ambers, claret ash and Japanese maples were really superb this year in our area. Deciduous trees evolved in climates where a period of dormancy over the cold time enabled them to survive. Damage to leaves is not a problem if there are no leaves left to damage. The new leaves on a deciduous plant only come when growth is triggered by a certain amount of cold being followed by a significant rise in temperature.



Ups and downs in the weather can result in plants which are responding to temperature stimuli in what, to us, appear to be crazy ways. Gardeners are not usually terribly concerned by some erratic behaviour from their deciduous ornamental plants but changes in weather patterns can wreak havoc with the productivity of fruit trees. Many fruits and nuts require a certain number of chill hours

below about seven degrees centigrade to be able to set fruit. The idea of 'chill hours' helps to explain why particular trees do better in some areas than others. Although most nurseries sell plants to suit their regions, it is well worth asking for advice regarding your particular area. In recent years we have had apples that have flowered twice with a resulting poor crop and apricots that flowered heavily early but were hit by frosts and had virtually no fruit. In addition to temperature, wind can also be a problem with fruit and branches damaged and pollinators not inclined to be on the job. While this is not too bad for the home orchardist, it would be hard to bear if your livelihood depended on the vagaries of the weather. In addition, changes over time to weather patterns are making some previously grown fruits no longer viable.

We take four distinct seasons we still experience here for granted. Not so a man we met in Singapore, who told us that one of the highlights of his visit to Melbourne had been the autumn leaves. I wasn't sure what he meant until he explained how magical it had been to see coloured leaves falling from the trees. I had been raving over the lush tropical plants, the enormous leaves with stripes of maroon, pink, yellow and orange, the spectacular orchids and the multitude of climbers. These he dismissed with a wave of his hand, beautiful but so ordinary to him and so ever present. Close to the equator, Singapore has two 'seasons' – wet and dry, although their version of 'dry' is not what we are used to and can include tropical downpours. Inevitably, such a different climate with day after day of humidity and 30 °C supports a different range of plants to the ones we usually grow.

I do enjoy the changes that our climate brings. Winter has its own gorgeous colours and shapes in our garden. Glossy variegated pink and orange leaves on coprosmas, changed from their green and yellow summer colours, are really spectacular. Nandinas are dressed in their winter shades of maroon and red. Birds are feasting on delicate tubular shaped Correa flowers and my favourite wattle, the Flinders Ranges wattle, is a haze of lemon blossoms. Daisies are rioting in pinks, whites, blues and yellows while the beautiful Alygyone, our gorgeous native hibiscus, is elegantly covered in large purple flowers. Bare branches provide us with chance to focus on sculptural tree forms and the colours, patterns and textures of bark. So let's enjoy the winter, embrace the cold weather, rain, even the frost and the wind, all of which would be novelties and highlights for a Singaporean.

Winter 2015 Workshops at Garden Gate of Inverleigh

Bookings essential – call Christine on 0403 267 286. All workshops include morning tea and printed notes. Participants need to dress for the weather and farm conditions. Wear closed footwear such as leather shoes or boots. Inside venue for theory aspects.

Pruning fruit trees: Sunday 19th July, 9 am – 12, cost \$30 Theory & guided practice in our orchard where the trees are kept low in a vase shape. Bring secateurs.

Garden Design: Sunday 9th & Sunday 16th August, 9 am – 11 am, cost \$50 includes both sessions. Week 1 – Basic design theory, garden tour, garden planning guide, Week 2 – Group feedback on your own garden ideas.

Happy gardening

Christine Windle

Garden Gate Nursery, Inverleigh

