

# Weather, we like it or not

The weather is a major factor in your life if you are a grower; it also affects a whole lot of other professions too, so one tends to get rather optimistic when put into a position of dealing with the uncertainties that it tends to shove your way. I have always maintained that if you worry about the weather then you are in the wrong job and over the course of my growing career I have had to reflect on that a number of times. Of course the weather will never be ideal, especially true when you grow a whole range of vegetable crops, what suits one may not suit the other, sometimes you would like to be able to order sunshine in one part of your field and rain in the other, but as we all know this is totally unrealistic but we can all but dream!

I have come to the conclusion that there are two types of weather, this is the way I think, in easy manageable chunks that gloss over all the uncertainties and variables over which I have little or in many cases no control whatsoever.

The first type is the regular sort of weather that we expect in a maritime climate, a mixture of many natural acts cobbled together in a random whirl of rain and sunshine with varying degrees of wind thrown in for good measure, winter weather is less of an issue as we have by that time grown our crops, we only need to harvest them for market. This is the sort of weather we get used to, the one we learn through trial and error to deal with and cope in a reasonable and sometimes haphazard sort of way. It is often less than ideal but we understand that this is the way it has to be. We make various contingency plans to cover our growing activities in the hope that we can reduce the multitude of risks that we face as growers, and as experience grows we get better at dealing with such risks.

The other type of weather is that which tends to be known as extremes, all things are relative and we have all seen the effects that real extremes can have in parts of the world where weather can be less equable than we are used to, when large numbers of people face real hardship and many perish at the hands of nature's extreme acts. To me an extreme weather event is one that has a serious detrimental effect on my business, I am sure that other people will have their own criteria. Generally we don't think of our weather as being extreme even when it gets into crazy moods but within my lifetime there have been quite regular extreme events:

I shall start with the big freeze of winter 1963 although not as a grower but as a 10 year old kid that knew nothing about weather at all. I now know that 1963 was an extreme weather year, if I had been grower it would have hurt like hell. But as a child it was a great adventure, to wake up to snow as deep as a car, to not have to go to school for a week as the heating was frozen and to not have to venture into the igloo bathroom in our town semi due to frozen plumbing was too good to be true. And it went on for months this adventure, the icicles around the gutter, the piles of sooty black ice in the streets piled up by the council shovels that came around and the grit on the footpaths that stuck to your wellies. We built ice tracks along the hilly streets for makeshift sledges built out of whatever we could find on our favourite dump at the back of the council houses. Sheer bliss, the innocence of youth no inconvenience to us at all, but then that's how being a child should be.

1976 not a good year to start growing as it failed to rain at all from April 25<sup>th</sup> to September 15<sup>th</sup> not a drop, not even a dewy morning. I was still part time growing so still had the day job to live on, but even more useful was access to copious amounts of irrigation water to keep my acre of crops alive. Not just dry but very hot too, temperatures over 35 C (it was still 100F) in those days. It was the summer with no end it just went on and on, it became very boring especially when every body's water supply went to just one hour daily. There was even the appointment of the Minister of Drought by the Tories, not that he did any good, just the government trying to look as if they were in control.

Eventually it rained and things got back to normal but it took another year to do so, the cracks in the ground were like earthquakes, people forget very quickly and life returned as if nothing had ever happened. But from that day I have never taken water for granted. If I was ever given the chance to choose between drought or flood I would go for the former every time, as least you have a fighting chance to find some water from somewhere and get it to your crops, with floods you are pissing into the wind.

The next weather extreme was the hurricane of 1987 this blew away my brand new 400 square metre tunnel only erected 3 weeks. It also brought down a pile of trees that led to the creation of Naida, my yacht but that is a story of its own and goes to prove that all extremes have winners and losers. The winds also wrecked some crops but not as badly as I was expecting and this is one of the odd things about extremes, once you have recovered from the immediate drama they usually turn out to be only half as bad as you were expecting.

After the great storm we had a pretty serious drought in 1994 or was it 1995? Not sure anyway after the drought of 1976 it was a mild event with an annual rainfall of just 385mm and it was not the whole country like 1976 just my area, but I had a basic irrigation system so actually almost enjoyed it as the weeds were so controllable. The big job was the need to tend irrigation equipment for days and nights for weeks, very stressful and hard work. After that I spent shed loads of money on big pipes and travelling boom sprayers, and even to this day I say it was the best money I ever spent. By now I had been in growing long enough to realise that risk reduction was the way forward.

The next major weather extreme was 2007 which most of you will remember if you were in growing. The spring started off as a pleasant affair, warm sunny and fairly dry, I have become very suspicious of such springs as it seems that you have to pay for such pleasure in the months to come. Rain and rain and rain went on and on and on in fact for 6 weeks with only two days without. Most growers suffered badly as a result with lost crops and lost opportunities for planting. We were partly flooded and lost some crops as a result, it wasn't just the flooding but the lack of sunshine that did the damage to crops, some just never made it. But the rain did stop by the end of July and we got on with getting weeds under control and planting late crops to fill the gaps and losses. Good growing conditions in the autumn helped things along by the years end it wasn't looking quite as bad as we had all feared. Just don't try and calculate what the event actually costs in financial terms or you would give up. The ever optimistic growers will always be able to look forward to next season it has to be better.

So 2008 was going to make it all right? Er, well no not quite, it turned out to be less wet but cold and gloomy with very little sunshine and not good growing weather at all, but by my reckoning it doesn't count as an extreme act of weather but if you add it to the dirge from 2007 it may qualify. The year

of 2009 was a great growing year with almost perfect conditions for most of it, but I am not sure how many growers noticed. Living memory is incredibly short, I am not sure if it is even 3 years, so many people have forgotten event recent extreme events maybe this is our way of coping with these traumas.

Winter 2009/10 got to an early start with deep snow in many parts of the country this affected some growers badly with many tales of heroic attempts to save tunnels from collapse, most did manage to as well, disrupted harvesting and frozen crops took their toll. The next winter was similar but we were generally better prepared for that one.

So in my 36 years as a grower there have been around 5/6 major weather extremes this is an average of one roughly every 6 years which gives you 5 years to recover, not bad really 1 in 6 -a fighting chance. But if you only started as a grower 6 years ago then you would have experienced 3 weather extremes-one every two years that is a lot of very bad weather to deal with in a very short space of time.

There is much talk in food production circles about the need to make our food systems resilient to a host of factors and of course weather is a key part of that. Diversity is seen as a key feature of building resilience and at Hardwick we have done much to try and integrate a systems approach to crop production to reduce pest and disease and to maintain fertility from within without relying too heavily on imported fertility. And for most of the time this has worked fairly well even though it tends to mean higher management input to keep it all working properly.

But this season I am close to admitting defeat in a way that I have never felt before, (actually I am sure I have many times before but have fortunately forgotten the occasions) The weather of course as you all know, well those of you in the south that is, has been an absolute nightmare since the end of March. Never in all my years have we had to endure such a long period of almost continual rain at this time of year, for 15 weeks it has been relentlessly wet. I have rainfall records going back 23 years and this is the worst so far. Occasionally there have been a few odd days when it just starts to dry out enough to contemplate some weed control or to re-drill some slug destroyed crops. So a frantic dash around on the tractor till it is too dark to see what you are doing and you have half managed to do that which you have already done once or even twice before or should have done 5 weeks ago! I have had to admit to getting onto land with machinery in conditions when I really know I should not as I know I am doing damage to the precious soil which really is a dreadful thing to do, but desperation takes many forms. It is not just the wet that's a problem, soil temperatures are low and light levels even lower and only the hardiest of crops is making normal progress, so far spuds are looking great although two weeks later than usual. Sweet corn and Squash, you have to be joking; not a chance this year. I could go on and on about what has not worked this season but those of you that have experienced this weather will know all about it. The difference with this season and 2007 is that at least in 2007 we managed to get a lot of crops started in a decent spring before the worst of the weather came and when it did it was all over in 6 weeks and a reasonable recovery ensued by the seasons end. The other major difference was that we entered the season in a position of strength, our customer base was strong, business was growing and the organic market was still on a roll, organic was still cool.

That was the recent past and today is the present, another day of rain, another day that I had hoped to do some long over-due cultivations, kill some overgrown weeds and try to ignore the sorry looking

crops in the fields. The garden crops look better as we can do more by hand there and it is sheltered from the wet winds more, but it is not looking the way I would like it to look, to me it looks shabby and almost unkempt, uncared and unloved. The field is my real worry, slugs like I have never seen before, not once in my whole career have I seen a slug problem on this scale, eating a whole acre of carrots twice and tearing brassicas to pieces. We have always had a great ally in the ground beetles to clear up any such pests, but this year something has gone wrong, and I need to find out what exactly, surely I can't just blame this on the weather? With a looming shortage of staple field crops winter looks bleak for local sales. We won't starve as a result of this season we are lucky enough to be able to go to work somewhere to earn enough to eat food produced by somebody else ware on the planet, a part of the planet where people may well suffer seriously as a result of an act of extreme weather.

Maybe my mood is a reflection of the dark skies today, the gentle windless (for a change) drip of the rain. Maybe tomorrow the sun will shine and do so for weeks hopefully long enough for me to be able to get my expensive state of the art irrigation kit out from under the cobwebs and be able to get back the small amount of control I thought I had earned from Mother Nature.