



Posted on Sat, Oct. 17, 2009

Look for the sunshine anywhere you can find it

The double whammy of gloomy skies and a near-frost had me eagerly watching the mail for results of a Vitamin D test my doctor had ordered last week.

Actually, no matter what the level of "sunshine vitamin" that ended up registering in my blood, I was suffering a serious deficit of light this week.

I spent last weekend home with a cold, tearing up the house on Saturday and sitting amid the debris, spent, on Sunday. By Monday, ready to climb the walls if I couldn't get a ticket to a sun-splashed island, I considered the limited things in my control and rearranged the living room.

It did change the scenery in the house, but even the views from corners where I'd never sat before were still the same.

Gray.

Remembering a long spell in summer when we lived under a cloud, I suspected that Wichita had suffered a record deficit in

sun this year, and wondered if hostas and other shade plants wouldn't flourish in "full sun" in Wichita if we never got any.

I called the National Weather Service in Wichita to see if anybody was tracking any lack-of-sun records.

"It's not one of the normal things we're going to keep track of," meteorologist Paul Howerton told me Thursday. Well, I would assert that it may be time. If Wichita is slowly turning into London, we need to know and act accordingly.

"The last time we had sunshine was the afternoon of the ninth," Paul said, just one day short of a week of gloom. He said that the record cold temperatures for this month were due to not only cold air but lack of afternoon sun to warm it up.

Well, there may not be records of lack of sun, but there are people who serve as barometers. One friend told me that her husband gets his energy from being outside, especially in their extensive garden, and he was coming home from work every evening in a foul mood. She herself was feeling the tug toward a tanning bed, if it weren't so unhealthy. I felt the same pull, and considered that mental health was every bit as much a part of health as physical health and could surpass it.

In another bid for a change in scenery, I headed to Kansas City midweek to find more fall color because of more trees, but otherwise same song, second verse. I certainly didn't want to be up there in the clouds if the sun happened to break out in Wichita, the warmer of the climates, so I scooted right back.

I once bought a greeting card that quotes novelist Sigrid Undset as saying, "Do I have to tell you what I've done to keep the sun always shining on me?"

It's a mysterious question that I think I know the answer to. But I tried to put it to work specifically in the garden this week.

Gratitude is one way. We dodged the first frost bullet, so we can continue to enjoy our flowers and take stock of what did well for us this year. My favorite annual turned out to be the orange Zahara Fire zinnia. While Ron Marcum of Dutch's Greenhouse praised the color of the yellow version to me — and it is a beautiful yellow, clear as a bell — the orange proved sturdier and more floriferous and has burnished itself into the color of burning embers for fall.

I also liked the pink-tinged version of Diamond Frost euphorbia. On the perennials front, I'm looking forward to experimenting more with coneflowers next year.

The most striking moment in the garden for me this summer, I think, was late in the season when I saw a

gorgeous out-of-the-ordinary butterfly flit around my garden flowers and then take off, apparently finding nothing to eat. It broke my heart and made me want to make a checklist for requirements of plants I buy: fragrant, disease-resistant and wildlife-friendly in addition to beautiful.

We also still have the Kansas Grown Farmers Market at 21st and Ridge Road at which to shop for a few more weeks (Oct. 31 is the last day). I need to lay in a larder of sweet potatoes and apples. I found my favorite way to fix sweet potatoes in a story about a lady who put a sweet potato to bake in her oven and was away unexpectedly for two hours. While I have to deplore leaving the house for any length of time with the stove on, her accident turned out to be happy when she found that the potato had turned into a sweet pudding. No prep work necessary, other than to scrub the tuber with a vegetable brush under running water, tuck into foil and put on the oven rack.

At least baked sweet potatoes are warm and the color of the sun. We need to look for the rays wherever we can find them.

Reach Annie Calovich at 316-268-6596 or acalovich@wichitaeagle.com.

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