

Signs, signs, everywhere signs



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By Nate Smelle

EVERY gardener and farmer knows that it is wise to keep a close eye on the weather and pay attention the signs nature provides at this time of year. If those of us with green thumbs fail to notice these clues reminding us that the seasons are changing, we risk losing the lion's share of the harvest we have been nurturing since the spring.

To the credit of modern meteorology, there are no shortages of online resources helping us keep track of how much precipitation to expect, what the temperature will be and when frost is on its way. As important as these tools are, there are many other things going on in and around the garden that we need to look out for if we want to ensure a healthy and hearty harvest.

Stopping by the Mackie's greenhouse and farm on Gauble Road to talk with them about why they feel it is important for people to attend the meeting in Faraday this Sunday regarding the proposed Freymond quarry, I noticed one of these signs as I walked up the driveway. Carefully woven amongst the branches of a maple tree approximately 15 feet or so above the ground was a large hornets' nest. Usually, spying these incredibly designed constructions closer to the earth's surface, I instantly remembered something that I had read in The Old Farmer's Almanac many years ago. The article had professed that when you notice hornet or wasp nest high up in the trees it is to be taken as a warning that a harsh winter with heavy snowfall was in store.

Looking through The Old Farmer's Almanac online later on that day, I found a whole bunch of other signs to watch for in preparation for winter. For example, it declared that frequent halos or rings around the sun or moon, heavy and numerous fogs during August, unusual abundance of acorns, insects marching in a line rather than meandering, pigs gathering sticks, spiders spinning larger than usual webs and entering the house in great numbers and mice chewing furiously into one's home are all indicators of a cold winter with lots of snow.

As much as the idea of pigs gathering sticks makes me smile, I have only had one encounter with a pig in the last few months and it was not preparing for winter. That said, I have observed each of the other signs listed above on many occasions throughout the summer. Most notably, for the past month I have been seriously engaged in a war on deer mice. Though by choice I have yet to kill a single one, I have captured and blindfolded several of them which I then drove deep into the woods never to be seen again. Little did I know these innocent creatures were likely just dropping by to warn me that winter is coming.

While some might say that these types of predictions are nothing but folklore and devoid of any scientific relevance, I have to disagree. Pondering the wasps' rationale regarding their decision to build their abode at a higher level, it seemed to that they must have recognized something in the weather leading up to the beginning of the nest construction that provoked them to move up in the world.

Jumping down this rabbit hole online I discovered that like the hornets, mice, insects, acorns, fog, sun and moon, The Old Farmer's Almanac was also calling for a rough winter ahead with "wild swings in temperature and precipitation." On the other hand, when I followed the trail a little further, I also found that Environment Canada was predicting a "milder than normal" winter in 2018,

courtesy of El Nino. Now that the fall equinox has come to pass, and the snowy season will soon be knocking on our doors, I will certainly be keeping an eye on which of these two predictions is more accurate regarding the winter of 2018/2019.

Although these two trusted weather-trackers are calling for the exact opposite type of winter ahead, in another way they are both affirming the same fact ? that climate change has made the weather far less predictable. Speaking with farmers and food growers throughout Hastings County and the Niagara Region, this unpredictability is an ongoing threat to their livelihoods and in turn food security in Ontario.

For the sake of their survival, the hornets and the deer mice I have taken prisoner have already developed a strategy to adapt to a changing climate.

Do we?