
FARMGIRL ANGST

BY MARILEE FOSTER

WEATHER OR NOT

The first block of sunflowers peaked anemically in late July. Unlike the second block, the first flowers got too much rain, no sun, no heat and were already on brown stalks when they mustered a brief campaign of yellow before folding on shallow rooted hinges to the ground. The second planting went in three weeks later and got heat and sun and just enough rain at the right times to make the flowers open slowly across themselves. There is almost a full week of yellow—enough to feel like a whole month—a visual crescendo that fades as gradually as it was built. Like hearing a held note, you know where it began but cannot know how soon it will end. So the bloom goes on with a mezzo-soprano in mind. Ordinary flowers, which are never ordinary, yellow and green against a blue sky and black trees, loud and bold and beautiful for it.

Contrary to perception, farmers don't like talking about the weather; we hate it. We wish deeply that all we ever had to say to each other was "Heck of a day?" "Yup, perfect." We talk about weather because it is what makes farming two full-time jobs. Raising crops is one, the second is working with the weather—abetting or offsetting, mitigating and resetting. Good soil helps, but the weather, not the soil, is our primary medium.

There is a hurricane, a tropical storm, a rainy weekend grinding up the coast. We still call it by the name it lost when its winds slowed, Ernesto. I am trying to get some tomatoes picked before what they are calling for: "maybe two inches of rain?" This estimate gives me no calm because the passing showers we had all last week left us with four inches more than we needed.

It would be, were it not for the abrupt arrival and long visitation of



wet, unseasonably cool weather, prime picking season. I am harvesting whatever is tinged by color and finding few truly ripe fruit. On the other hand, for much of the day I am conscious of our potato trucks leaving the farm. It is just decent enough to dig and they are loading every one. I know the trucks by the sound of their individual engines, and I can tell, even from a distance, that the trucks coming home are coming in full. It makes you feel proud to be working so hard and so urgently, but on the other hand is the sense that we are salvaging rather than reaping. It's not the bliss it could be.

Historically, Long Island has had idyllic climate for agriculture and still this is true. From spinach to peanuts, now artichoke to endive, you can grow it here, but, based on what my father says, it used to be better, less nerve-racking; they never had droughts like this, never had heat, never had rain like this either. "It was never like this, I have never, ever seen such

a crummy two weeks in my whole life." He throws his hands down as if he's given up on a project or a tool, "It just makes you want to give up."

My father blames all the people going places for the climate change he's seen. He adds up all the cars and airplanes and says that that alone would do it. If it were up to him he'd take all of those high-flying, fuel-burning jets out of the sky, because it's where they place their pollution that also matters. My father is not an environmentalist; he's a practical thinker. He says bad weather used to blow clear of here. "Sure you'd have a storm, but then it would be over and the sky would be just as blue. It would be perfect for growing things." □