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Dog Days of Summer

by Bonnah Boyd, Somervell County Master Gardener

This phrase refers to the sultry days of summer. In the Northern Hemisphere the dog days of summer are most commonly experienced in the months of July and August.

The phrase has an ancient astrological origin. The Romans noted that the brightest star, Sirius in the Big Dog constellation (Canis Major) was lined up with the sun during the hottest time of the year. This conjunction was believed to cause the peak heat of summer. The Old Farmers' Almanac lists the traditional period as the 40 days beginning July 3 and ending August 11.

Many events are often planned during the "Dog Days". These include dog contests and pictures, parties, sports tournaments at the beach, baseball games and tours, with or without your dog.

If you plan a summer vacation during this time, don't forget the plants, both indoors and out. Below is a checklist of activities to do for your garden and plants prior to leaving.

Water: Irrigate landscape and garden thoroughly. If you have a vegetable garden, have a neighbor water, as needed. Many containerized plants need watering at least every third day to survive the heat. Group containers together in easy reach of the water hose.

Mow: Mow and trim your lawn the day before you leave. The lawn may need to be mowed a week later, so either be home then or make arrangements for weekly mowing.

Weed: Pull, spray or mulch over existing weeds in the garden and landscape.

Prune: Check roses, perennials and annual flowers to determine if they need deadheading.

Mulch: Mulching preserves water in the soil, reduces soil temperatures, reduces weed populations and gives a fresh look to the garden.

Do a pest check: Check for insects and diseases. Take action to control populations of insects pests that are present. Diseases are less prevalent in the summer, but check for fungal diseases, such as black spot and blight. Apply a fungal spray as needed.

Harvest: In the vegetable garden, harvest all ripe and nearly ripe fruit. Call a neighbor to come harvest for you, if you are going to be gone for more than a week.

Reference: *Doug Welch's Texas Garden Almanac*

The Beginning of Paper

by Katie Hunholz, Somervell County Master Gardener Intern

With the current trend of viewing documents on the internet, writing letters via email, and reading books on ipads or Kindles, paper is slowly becoming a thing of the past. However, I believe that paper will never completely disappear, due to people who prefer being able to feel the paper in their hands rather than read it on a screen (I, myself, am one of those old-fashioned readers). I wouldn't call myself a 'tree-hugger', but I do value trees for all the amazing materials they provide us, and for their beauty, and the part they play in the ecosystem. However, paper wasn't always dependent on trees; it originally came from *Cyperus papyrus*.

The word 'paper' is derived from the Egyptian word 'papyrus'. Paper- a thin, flexible material in sheets, made from rags, wood, etc., and used for printing or writing on (*Webster's New World Dictionary*)- was first made from the papyrus plant, which originates from Ethiopia and Egypt. Papyrus, also known as Nile grass, or paper reed, can reach up to 15 feet tall, growing in water depths up to 3 feet. Despite its willowy appearance, the stem of papyrus was often woven into baskets, or even boats. With both strength and flexibility, papyrus was valued as a building material and a writing medium.

The use of papyrus as a paper originated with the Egyptians, about 4000 years ago. Paper made from papyrus comes from the pith, or core, of the plant. The pith is gently peeled into strips, which are then laid out in two layers, with the second layer being laid on top of the first layer, but at a 90 degree angle. The sugary sap from the plant acts as a natural glue, combining the two layers as they dry. The front side of the paper was always the side with the horizontal strips, not the side with the vertical strips. As other nations began to desire a way to transcribe their written language, the use of papyrus quickly spread; it was especially popular with the Greeks and Romans. Even after parchment was developed (a type of paper made from animal skin), papyrus was still desirable. However, the use of papyrus slowly began to fade beginning around 800 AD.

The creation of paper, beginning with papyrus, allowed countries to advance in culture and technology. Previously people had no way of communicating except through their spoken language. It's difficult to imagine a world with no written documents, but without papyrus that would be our world. Unfortunately, papyrus is now rarely used as a paper, or as a building material. Its lack of use has led to papyrus being an endangered plant; perhaps it is time to begin the cultivation of papyrus once again. It would be a shame to lose such a significant plant with its historical, cultural, and technological value.

Sources:

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