

The Fickle Rainfall of the Hill Country

I have written several columns over the years about the unpredictable nature of our rainfall. I guess it is because it is a topic everyone talks about, complains about, and worries about. And last year was just an example of another weird rainfall year.

At our house last year, the first 5 months were about as “normal” as possible, with a total of about 9 inches which gave us reasonable spring flowers and a good start for most grasses. Then, just as all the vegetation was at its peak growing/water utilization rate and hottest temperatures, we had two of the driest months in June and July with no significant rainfall for almost 90 days.

Then in September and October, at our house we were fortunate to get about 22 inches of rain—I say fortunate mainly because we didn’t get the 30 or 40 inches that many folks did nor any of the really damaging flooding that many people experienced. Fortunately, November was dry allowing some significant drying and the creeks to return to their banks.

For the calendar year, our property received about 38 inches, well about the “average” of 29-30, but certainly no record even for the 18 years we have been here. But, as the saying goes, it is “not how much rain you get, but how much you keep.” And we certainly didn’t keep 38 inches on our property, nor, I suspect did most of you.

After the 11 inches we got in September and two inches in early October the ground was thoroughly saturated and not capable of absorbing much more water. So the six inches of rain we got on the 14th and 15th of October certainly did not all soak into the ground, in fact, most of it probably ran off. In fact, we were probably fortunate it did, without any damage or erosion, as we were already seeing significant standing water here and there.

Most of the time, or course, we would prefer to see the rain stay on our property and nourish our vegetation and the soils underneath.

At the opposite end of the rainfall spectrum, we certainly have many little 0.1, to 0.25 inch sprinkles. After one such event last July, a friend asked how much rain we got and said a little less than 0.25 inches, to which he replied, “Well, every little bit helps I guess.” It is a common response, but I am not sure it is true.

In fact, it is my opinion that light rains up to at least as much as a quarter inch and maybe as much as a half inch do almost no good for our vegetation. Why? Because much, if not most, of light rains fall on the leaves of vegetation, including cedar, trees, shrubs, grass and flowers, or on dead leaf litter covering the ground, where it simply evaporates back into the air. Even a quarter inch soaking into the ground may evaporate from the top inch or so of soil before much gets taken up by plant roots. And of course, all the above is accelerated on hot, sunny, or windy days.

So I guess you could say that I am picky about how much rain I would like to see, in terms of nourishing my plants. I would like to see at least an inch in every rainfall, but maybe not more than 3 inches so we don't get too much runoff.

Of course, all of the above has to do with keeping the trees, shrubs, grass, and forbs healthy and happy. But then when the consideration has to do with how much water is in my rainwater tanks, then of course, when the tanks are low, I want heavier rainfall and when the tanks are full, I just wish I had more tanks!

Having grown up in an area averaging about 15 inches per year, and having lived for a time in an area getting about 60 inches a year, I am glad I live in the Hill Country—warts and all. I just hope we don't have to begin adjusting to a hotter, drier climate too fast. I rather like the one we have now.

As the population increases, as it certainly will, and the rainfall decreases, as it probably will, conservation, smaller lawns, and rainwater catchment is most likely to be in our future, and those are all good things.

Until next time...

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