



TURFGRASS MATTERS

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Minus Steam and Sizzle, Summer '96 is a Breeze

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Washington, normally an oppressive, sweltering place in August, has become Maine on the Potomac. After a cool and wet July, the weather forecasters said heat and haze were finally on the way.

Wrong.

Today will be the 29th summer day in a row below 90 degrees, tying a record set in 1972, according to the National Weather Service. And the record probably will be broken tomorrow, the Weather Service said, predicting a high in the mid 80's.

Add to that the above-average rainfall and a sun that has broken through the clouds for only 52 percent of daylight hours since July 1—62 percent is the norm—and the summer of 1996 spells cool.

Way cool.

It has been a good news, bad news kind of summer. Area residents are hitting the beach less often but sleeping to the curl of nightly breezes. Homeowners are saving money on air-conditioning bills but are getting out the lawn mower more often.

Plants need less water, but certain fungi are blooming. The air quality is good, but allergists expect the ragweed pollen count to be worse this year than last.

But all in all, no one is in too much of a sweat.

"You can't beat it," said Emmanuel Ottley, standing in the shade outside the Safeway on 17th Street NW, where he sells T-shirts, incense and framed portraits from a small stand. "It's the nicest weather we've had in some years here."



What gives?

That is a question both great and small. To be sure, there are some immediate explanations. A strong ridge of high pressure over the southwestern states has kept an area of low pressure, known as a trough, over the Northeast, bringing a northerly air flow, unseasonable coolness and lots of rain.

But why is this trough so persistent?

Tough question

"We're still investigating," said Rich Tinker, a climatologist at the National Weather Service.

Tinker's prime suspect: The North Atlantic Oscillation Pattern.

This is a mega-shift in circulation patterns in the upper atmosphere across the far northern latitudes that occurs every 10 to 15 years, he explained. The oscillation pattern indicates where ridges and troughs are likely to dominate across Europe, Greenland, and the United States as the jet stream, a river-shaped band of air in the upper atmosphere, moves

across the Northern Hemisphere.

In the 1970's, the pattern caused more troughs to dominate in the eastern United States and favored harsh winters and mild summers. But through the 1980's until last winter, the upper atmosphere pattern caused more ridges-high pressure-in the East, favoring mild winters and warm summers. Indeed, the six hottest Washington summers since officials began keeping records in 1871 occurred from 1980 to 1995.

Now, said Tinker, it looks as if we're back to the pattern of the 1970's, with the shift having occurred sometime last fall. The first result was all the snow that was dumped on us last winter the second is this summer's cool weather.

"Look, I've got a T-shirt on," said Charlie Dalton, wearing pants and plucking at the nap of a green underneath beneath a white work shirt

continued on page 5

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