

The end of the Season

By Andrew Smith

Fall, for me, is a sort of wistful time of year because I always forget to drain the hoses at night and my spray nozzles freeze solid and crack and then when they thaw out the next afternoon they gush out water like fountains, usually precisely where I don't want a fountain of any kind, like beside my pile of dry firewood. So I have to take them off and throw them on my old nozzle pile, which is getting quite large. Then I go in the greenhouse to my stash of fresh nozzles, which is also quite large, and put new spray nozzles on the hoses, which I will again forget to drain, until my old nozzle pile is finally large enough to make into a sculpture and start charging people to come look at it. And I, wistfully, don't think it will be that much longer now.

I go through the same thing in the spring, but in reverse. In either case the days are warm and sunny but the nights are cold and sharp. And after 20 years of cracking nozzles I still forget that a hot afternoon is often followed by an icy morning, and visa versa. But the one step I have taken is to invest in the cheapest spray nozzles I can find, since they seem to have such a tenuous and temporary existence.

I'm going to use epoxy glue and make them into a huge garden dragon. It won't be a fire-breathing dragon, but if I hook it up to a hose it will leak like a waterfall. Then I'm going to call my plumber and ask him to fix it. Probably just needs a little caulk.

Sadly, it's the end of the outdoor bonsai season. Winter is stalking around here somewhere in great big freezing white boots and all my trees need to be put away, or covered up somehow, to protect them from that clumsy cold foot.

Although we've had freezing nights recently, it hasn't been as cold as usual and it makes me nervous when winter hasn't showed up on time. It's not like I miss him or anything, but I know he's skulking around someplace and I don't know where. I get that creepy feeling like he's hiding behind a door, ready to leap out and scare me when I walk by.

Since winter has been lollygagging along this year I'm a bit ahead of schedule in preparing for it. Usually I am finishing putting my trees into

their greenhouses when they have about 6" of wet snow on them and a blizzard is barreling down on top of us. Sometimes it's 3 a.m. and I have to use a snow shovel to get to the last of them. If that sounds like a case of poor planning, I agree, except it is often T-shirt and shorts weather right up until the first snowflake comes fluttering, butterfly-like, down.

But this year I have all my trees, all the ones I can lift anyway, set into their greenhouses for the winter. Trees that will be wintering outside have pine needles piled around the pots for insulation. Yet nary a snowflake have I seen.

The big excitement for me last year was this wonderful infestation of voles that we had in the Black Hills. Cute little critters. They look like they'd make a neat pet. They eat peas, so I could keep a few around to clean my plate for me if peas ever show up on it. They also eat tree bark. Last winter they ate enough of my bonsai trees that I think I can honestly say that I've done my part in feeding the world vole population.

I tried EVERYTHING to get rid of them, all to no avail. I tried sprays, granules, powders, traps, cats, electronic repellents, mechanical repellents, sonar repellents and nothing worked. I was so desperate that when a friend suggested maybe I should just go out into the greenhouses and politely ask the voles to leave, I actually tried it. I figured it could not possibly be any less effective, and was cheaper, than the other things I had been trying. And I was right; it wasn't any less effective, it just wasn't effective at all.

Eventually I ended up putting all the trees up on pallets on cinderblocks to get them off the ground so the voles could not get to them. That worked, but it was a real mess because I had to reorganize everything in the middle of the winter. So this year I put the pallets in the greenhouses first, and then the trees in afterwards, which is much easier than the way I did it last year.

I also found another anti-vole spray that is supposed to keep them away and I soaked everything in it. It's made of pigs blood and is somewhat ghastly to use. But for the first time my dogs and cats, and even the neighborhood weasel, seem to have taken an interest in bonsai.

After all this work it seems likely that the vole population has crashed, or quit being vegetarian, and it's all unnecessary. I am always getting prepared

for whatever disaster happened last year and never ready for the one that's happening this year.

But I got all my trees put away before it snowed, and that's something.

Enjoy the winter while it lasts.