Mostly dry weather has prevailed across the area for the month of November with FAWN Weather Stations across the area reporting half an inch of rain or less for the month and some station reporting no precipitation for November. Ground water tables are dropping quickly across the area and National Weather Service indicates that drought conditions are increasing around Lake Okeechobee.

Cooler weather prevailed toward the end of the November and into December with average temperatures running well below normal since Thanksgiving.

Crops look gorgeous but prices have been soft on a number of items causing many growers to reduce spraying and even stop harvesting in some instances. A wide range of items are coming to market including

<table>
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<th>Rainfall (Inches)</th>
<th>Ave Relative Humidity (Percent)</th>
<th>ET (Inches/Day) (Average)</th>
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Freeze Warning Issued For Most of South Florida
cucumbers, eggplant, herbs, peppers, tomatoes, squash and specialty items. Melon harvest is largely finished across the area and light volumes of strawberries are coming on the market.

The short-term forecast from the National Weather Service in Miami indicates an Arctic air mass will work into South Florida behind a strong cold front today and remain in place through mid week bringing the possibility of freezing temperatures to much of South Florida over the next few days.

National Weather Service has issued a freeze warning for much of South Florida. A freeze watch means sub-freezing temperatures are possible. These conditions could kill crops and other sensitive vegetation.

By late week, highs will return back into the 70s with lows returning back into the 50s and 60s by Sunday morning.

Indications are that a significant cold blast could invade Florida during the early part of next week; this one could be even more significant than this current cold outbreak! Both gfs and ecmwf models are showing this...so it is definitely something to monitor throughout the week.

For additional information, visit the National Weather Service in Miami website at http://www.srh.noaa.gov/mfl/newpage/index.html

Insects

Whiteflies

Growers and scouts in Hillsborough and Manatee counties report that whitefly activity is increasing with nymphs and pupae present in many older fields. Growers have curtailed spraying in many places in response to poor market prices.

Around Palm Beach County, respondents indicate that whitefly pressure remains generally low but.

Around SW Florida, whitefly pressure remains low overall but is up and down depending on the location. Scouts report finding some nymphs and pupae in tomato and pepper.

Reports from Homestead indicate that whiteflies remain active in some squash, okra and other crops.

Leafminers

Around Palm Beach County leafminers remain active. Leafminer activity has been highest in eggplant and tomato with some problems being reported in leafy greens.

Reports from the Manatee/Ruskin area indicate that leafminers are around but are not too bad.

Around Southwest Florida, respondents indicate that leafminers are starting to move around and are increasing especially on younger crops.

Worms

Growers and scouts around Immokalee report that worm pressure has declined but scouts continue to find new hatches. Scouts are finding a variety of worms including southern armyworm in tomato as well as melonworms and pickleworms in cucumbers and squash.
Reports from Manatee County indicate worm pressure has slacked off a bit but pressure remains persistent especially in pepper.

**Worm pressure in sweet corn remains persistent in the Glades.** Both black cutworm and some of corn earworm (Helicoverpa sp) have been found in head lettuce with the larvae boring into the base of the lettuce heads.

Some imported cabbage worm moths are flying around in leafy greens and some egg-masses can be found.

Respondents in Palm Beach County report that worm pressure has declined but army worms and loopers are still active and some egg masses are being found.

**Aphids**

Growers and scouts around Southwest Florida report that aphids are blowing around and are forming colonies in some crops.

Reports from Palm Beach County indicate that winged aphids are on the move but are not a big concern in most areas. The exception is in the Glades, where aphids are starting to pick up in the leaf crops causing problems in Chinese cabbage where numbers are high in some fields. Aphids are also causing some problems in squash.

Reports indicate that aphid numbers are mostly low around Manatee County. In Hillsborough County, aphids are increasing in strawberries.

**Pepper Weevil**

Growers and scouts around southwest Florida indicate that pepper weevils have become widespread but remain low in most locations and note that populations have started to build in some older plantings.

Respondents from Manatee County indicate pepper weevil numbers remain mostly low.

Around Palm Beach County, growers and scouts report that weevils are present in pepper and increasing in some older fields.

**Broad mites**

Around Immokalee reports indicate that broad mites remain active in pepper and eggplant but are declining in most places.

Around the Manatee/Ruskin area, broad mites are mostly light to moderate depending on the location.

Reports from Palm Beach County indicate that broad mite pressure remains persistent and they are common in maturing pepper. Some growers note that they have been particularly troublesome this fall.

**Spider mites**

Reports indicate that low levels of two-spotted spider mites are building in a variety of crops including tomatoes in SW Florida and eggplants in Palm Beach County.
Strawberries growers around Plant City are releasing predator mites for two-spot spider mite control as their numbers rise.

**Thrips**

Around Palm Beach County, thrips are common in some older pepper and scouts report finding western flower thrips as well as *Thrips palmi*, *kelliae* and *schultzei* in tomato where groundnut ringspot virus is also present. Growers indicate that control is proving difficult.

Around Hillsborough County, growers and scouts report finding chili thrips in strawberry.

Thrips remain low and patchy in occurrence in other areas and no problems are being reported.

**Cucumber beetle**

Growers and scouts indicate that cucumber beetles are causing problems in a few locations around South Florida particularly in the Glades where strong populations of six spotted cucumber beetles are on the rampage and pretty much feeding on anything leafy and green.

**Stinkbug**

Growers and scouts in several locations around South Florida are reporting scattered problems with stink bugs.

**Diseases**

**Groundnut ringspot virus**

Groundnut ringspot virus continues to be identified from locations around South Florida but overall incidence is low and occurrence remains sporadic.

Groundnut ringspot virus is a relatively new virus affecting tomatoes in Florida.

Foliar symptoms include necrotic flecking/spots, irregular chlorotic areas and deformation (inward rolling) of leaflets. Necrotic lesions on stem and petiole epidermal tissues may also be present.

GRSV has previously been found in Argentina, Brazil and South Africa infecting hosts including tomato, pepper, peanut, soybean and coriander. Alternate hosts for GRSV in Florida are not currently known and need to be explored.

The narrow host range of GRSV, contrasts with the extremely wide host range of tomato spotted wilt virus, (TSWV), a tospovirus that is common in the southeastern U.S. and closely related to GRSV. Both viruses induce similar symptoms on tomato necessitating serological or molecular tests to accurately identify which virus is present.

GRSV is transmitted exclusively by several species of thrips. The virus must be acquired by larval thrips for subsequent transmission as adults. Reported GRSV vectors include the western flower thrips (*Frankliniella occidentalis*), common blossom thrips (*F. schultzei*) and *F. gemina*. 
Transmission occurs in a circulative propagative manner, meaning that the virus multiplies in the vector. Nymphs must emerge on an infected host plant to be able to acquire the virus, which is then spread by the adult insects.

**Early symptoms of infection are difficult to diagnose.** In young infected plants the characteristic symptoms consist of inward cupping of leaves and leaves that develop a bronze cast followed by dark spots. As the infection progresses additional symptoms develop which include dark streaks on the main stem and wilting of the top portion of the plant. Fruit may be deformed, show uneven ripening and often have raised bumps on the surface. Once a plant becomes infected the disease cannot be controlled.

**Control of this disease is difficult.** To prevent spread of the virus, infected plants should be immediately rogued to prevent spread to neighboring plants. Control of insects, especially thrips, is important to reduce spread of the virus by vectors.

The close relationship of GRSV and TSWV likely indicates that integrated management strategies including the use of virus-free transplants by excluding thrips from plant houses and use of metalized (UV-reflective) mulch developed for TSWV by scientists at the University of Florida's North Florida Research and Education Center in Quincy will also be effective for GRSV. This integrated management approach combines the use of insecticides to reduce thrips larval development and thus limit secondary virus spread.

The combination of UV reflective mulches, acibenzolar-S-methyl (Actigard), and insecticides has provided excellent management of TSWV in commercial tomato fields.

For more info and photos of the disease, go to:

http://entomology.ifas.ufl.edu/pestalert/groundnut_ringspot_a_big.jpg

http://entomology.ifas.ufl.edu/pestalert/groundnut_ringspot_b_big.jpg

http://entomology.ifas.ufl.edu/pestalert/groundnut_ringspot_d_big.jpg

**TYLCV**

Respondents in the Manatee/Ruskin area report TYLCV is not too bad but is rising in some tomatoes nearing termination.

Around Immokalee, TYLCV has been creeping up in several locations but overall levels remain low with a few hot spots being reported where infection is up to 8-12% in some places.

Growers and scouts in Palm Beach indicate that TYLCV is low but can be found in some older fields.

**Bacterial leaf spot**

Reports from Palm Beach indicate that bacterial spot remains somewhat active where it is established but note that most fields remain clean except where bacteria came in on transplants or fields that were infected earlier in the season.

Around Immokalee, scouts indicate there has been some increase in bacterial spot in pepper and tomato but overall bacterial spot is low and many fields remain clean.
In the Manatee Ruskin area, growers report that bacteria spot is around and has been slowly increasing in some peppers and tomatoes.

**Target Spot**

Growers and scouts around southwest Florida report that target spot is flaring up in some tomato fields.

Respondents report target spot is also present at mostly low levels in other areas.

Dr Gary Vallad, Plant Pathologist at GCREC writes foliar symptoms of target spot caused by *Corynespora cassiicola* consist of brown-black lesions with subtle concentric rings giving them a target-like appearance. These can be confused with early blight. Fruit symptoms of target spot often consist of small sunken lesions, but can develop larger zonate lesions.

Target spot has a broad host range and is favored by periods of high humidity and free moisture (rain or dew) and temperatures between 70 - 94 °F.

Management strategies for target spot require an integrated approach for best results.

- Rotate tomato fields to avoid carryover on crop residue.
- Avoid rotations among solanaceous crops.
- Eliminate any volunteers and weed species (especially solanaceous weeds) that can act as a reservoir.
- Start with clean, healthy transplants preferably produced in facilities removed from tomato production.
- Maintain proper fertility, nitrogen deficiencies favor the development of early blight.
- Apply fungicides in a preventive manner when conditions favor disease development.

Gary indicates that based on his spray trials, he would rate available products for efficacy against Target spot (and Early blight) as follows:

1) Switch, Inspire Super  
2) Revus Top, Scala  
3) Tanos, Endura, Quadris (and other strobilurins), Reason  
4) Bravo (chlorothalonil)  
5) Mancozeb, Copper

He advises target spot will often go unnoticed by growers and scouts; who will often misidentify it as bacterial spot. He advises growers to hit target spot harder early on, as it is difficult to control once plants get to the 2nd-3rd tie as it is difficult to get good penetration with any contact fungicide into the interior of the plant.

Both target spot and early blight will do very well in this weather, especially with the heavy dews we’ve been having.

**Downy mildew**

Reports from around South Florida indicate that downy mildew is present on basil primarily in older maturing plantings. Growers need to vigilant and on a preventative spray program to avoid losses.

Growers and scouts in Palm Beach County are reporting downy mildew is common in squash mostly in older plantings that are not on regular spray program or are being grown organically.
mildew is also present cucumber. As in basil, growers need to vigilant and on a preventative spray program to avoid losses.

**Respondents around SW Florida indicate that downy mildew is present in cucumbers and squash at low levels.**

**Powdery mildew**

Respondents in Palm Beach are report that powdery mildew is common in older squash but note that it has been picked multiple times.

Powdery mildew is also beginning to show up in some pepper around Palm Beach County.

Growers and scouts around Manatee are seeing increases in both cukes and yellow squash in Manatee County.

**Fusarium**

Around Manatee County, growers and scouts report that race 3 fusarium is terrible in farms with a diseases history and getting worse by the day.

Around Southwest Florida, some fusarium crown rot starting to show in older tomatoes but overall levels are very low.

**Vine Decline**

Respondents indicate that watermelon vine decline finished off a few fields around Southwest Florida and also caused some isolated problems in Hardee and Manatee Counties this fall.

**Southern blight**

Growers and scouts in all areas are reporting finding a few scattered tomato plants with southern blight. Incidence is less than 1% in most places.

**News You Can Use**

**Ag Research Wise Investment**

Because funding has been virtually frozen in recent years, relatively small increases in the nation’s investment can kick-start a new era of innovation in this important field.

Agricultural research boosts an industry that remains one of our economy’s powerhouses.

Agriculture is one of the nation’s largest employers, with more than 2 million farmers and some 19 million people in allied industries.

While the nation’s trade deficit increased to $46.3 billion in August, the United States continued to be a net exporter in agriculture, with the industry running a $1.8 billion trade surplus.

Agricultural research also promotes solutions for many of the nation’s most pressing problems: childhood obesity, environmental stewardship, energy security or even food safety as agricultural issues.
With the federal budget deficit approaching $1.3 trillion, Congress needs to take a hard look at every government program to make sure that the taxpayers are getting real value for their hard-earned dollars.

But there’s one federal investment — agricultural research — that reaps returns by promoting economic growth, addressing urgent national and international problems, and attracting young people to fields where their talents are sorely needed and their contributions will be well-rewarded.

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While most Americans may pay little attention to where their food comes from, agriculture is one of the nation’s largest employers, with more than 2 million farmers and some 19 million people in allied industries.

While the nation’s trade deficit increased to $46.3 billion in August, the United States continued to be a net exporter in agriculture, with the industry running a $1.8 billion trade surplus.

In one indication of the industry’s vitality, the nation’s more than 2,500 farmer-owned cooperatives contribute more than $190 billion to the economy, including a total payroll of at least $8 billion that supports more than 250,000 jobs. Especially during a downturn that has hit hard at Rural America, these farm cooperatives offer an economic lifeline to countless communities.

While spurring a crucial sector of the economy, agricultural research also promotes solutions for many of the nation’s most pressing problems. Most Americans may not think of childhood obesity, environmental stewardship, energy security or even food safety as agricultural issues. But, by finding new ways to encourage healthy diets, produce and use bio-fuels, and improve safety practices in processing plants and restaurants, agricultural research is indispensable to solving these problems.

Urgent as they are, Americans’ agricultural challenges pale in comparison to world hunger. Nothing describes the dimensions of this crisis as starkly as these inescapable facts: Currently, the world’s population is about 6 billion, with an estimated 1 billion people living in poverty and enduring chronic hunger. Over the next 30 to 40 years, the world’s population is expected to grow by about 50 percent.

But few experts expect the world’s capacity to produce and use food to increase at a comparable rate, unless agricultural research finds new ways to meet the needs of this growing population while using about the same amount of land and limited inputs of water, fertilization and chemicals.

With the world’s most advanced agriculture, it is critically important that the United States conduct the research that can improve agricultural productivity in energy-efficient, environmentally sustainable, and economically feasible ways.

The alternatives to more knowledge are nightmarish: famines, terrorism, and wars fought over food and water. In spite of these great domestic and international needs, agricultural research remains a budgetary stepchild. Federal funding increased from a little above $1.3 billion in 1998 to slightly more than $2 billion in 2003. But, since 2005, funding has flat-lined at about $2.1 billion. Thus, the Department of Agriculture reports that its Agricultural Food and Research Initiative rejected more than 80 percent of the meritorious research proposals it received in 2006 and 78 percent in 2007.

As it grapples with economic policy and budgetary priorities, Congress should support a long-overdue increase in agricultural research at the nation’s public land-grant universities. These uniquely American educational
institutions conduct trailblazing research and disseminate the results through the agricultural Extension service to farmers, allied industries, and the general public.

At a time when only 3.7 percent of the undergraduates at U.S. colleges are majoring in agricultural studies and related career fields, an increase in research funding will also serve the public purpose of encouraging young people to enter professions that are essential to growing the economy and feeding a hungry humanity.

A skilled workforce. Economic growth. Environmental sustainability. A more stable world. These are among the rewards that the nation will reap by investing in agricultural research. What better investment could be made in America’s future?

Chuck Conner
Delta Farm Press, Dec. 1, 2010

**America's Agricultural Angst**

In "America's Agricultural Angst," which appeared on Forbes.com on January 19, "New Geographer" columnist Joel Kotkin hit a homerun. He writes:

"Over the next 40 years the world will be adding some 3 billion people. These people will not only want to eat, they will want to improve their intake of proteins, grains, fresh vegetables and fruits. The U.S., with the most arable land and developed agricultural production, stands to gain from these growing markets. Last year the U.S.' export surplus in agriculture grew to nearly $35 billion, compared with roughly $5 billion in 2005."

Kotkin also demonstrates how the irrational arguments put forth by the green extremist movement in the United States are threatening our nation's food supply and economy. His first order of business is to point out the inaccuracy of the same Time magazine article that we criticized last year. "The romantic model being promoted by Time and agri-intellectuals like Michael Pollan hearkens back to European and Tolstoyan notions of small family farms run by generations of happy peasants," he writes. "But this really has little to do with the essential ethos of American agriculture."

Mr. Kotkin goes on to debunk the notions that a few, powerful corporations control the farming industry and an all-organic food supply is the wave of the future:

"Families own almost 96% of the nation's 2.2 million farms, including the vast majority of the largest spreads. And small-scale agriculture, after decreasing for years, is on the upswing; between 2002 and 2009 the number of farms increased by 4%.

"This trend toward smaller-scale specialized production represents a positive trend, but large-scale, scientifically advanced farming still produces the majority of the average family's foodstuffs, as well as the bulk of our exports. Overall, organic foods and beverages account for less than 3% of all food sales in the U.S.—hardly enough to feed a nation, much less a growing, hungry planet."

**Beware Snake Oil Fertilizers**

Something about high fertilizer prices brings the snake oil salesmen crawling out from the woodwork looking for a quick dollar from folks trying to reduce the cost of raising crops.

“My mother always told me that if it looked too good to be true, it was,” said Vanessa Corriher, Texas AgriLife Extension forage specialist, during the recent annual Agricultural Technology Conference on the Texas A&M-Commerce campus.
She and soil fertility specialist Mark McFarland took on what they charitably referred to as “alternative fertilizers,” and pointed to research data that show no economic benefit from non-traditional nutrient formulations. Those do not include animal manures and legumes, which can augment a conventional fertility program, they said.

“A lot of these products are promoted heavily,” McFarland said. “Some, such as Medina, have been around a long time and have been studied.”

He said Medina is supposed to “rev up soil microbes.” But results from multiple state testing over seven years showed improvement in crop production was “zero. It’s still here and with new formulations,” he said.

Other products, including humic acids that are supposed to change soil chemistry and improve nutrient uptake are equally unimpressive. “Humic acid occurs naturally in the soil,” he said. A three-year study on four crops showed “no economic response.”

He singled out Avail, promoted as a “progerminator” that would produce equal yields with about 25 percent the standard Phosphorus fertilizer rate. “The product did fine,” McFarland said, in North Carolina tests. “But it costs the same amount per acre (as the standard fertilizer rate).” He said reliance on the material would result in “mining the soil) of nutrients. Eventually, producers have to add more phosphorus.”

“These products have appealing sticker price tags,” Corriher said, “but the economics may not add up.”

She recommended trying no more than a small amount on limited acreage to evaluate a product. “Traditional fertilizers produce the best yields,” she said. “We see a significant difference between traditional fertilizers and snake oils.”

Research has shown average yields with the “alternative products” at 900 pounds of forage per acre compared to 3200 pounds per acre with traditional fertilizers. “We see little difference between these products and untreated check plots,” she said.

McFarland recommends producers ask for more information before using these “miracle” products. “Insist on scientific research from a credible source,” he said. He said an Internet search might not provide reliable information. “The first few sites will be marketing sites,” he said.

“Request local data and conduct your own scientific tests over a uniform area, multiple plots with and without the product. Replication is a key.”

He said plots should all be managed and harvested similarly.

Ron Smith, Southwest Farm Press, Dec. 1, 2010

**Tampa District Wage and Hour Seminars**

Growers and contractors are invited to attend the Tampa District’s Wage and Hour seminars to receive up-dates on many of the agricultural enforcement issues they could face this year.

Presenters and topics may vary at each location but attendees can expect updates on the H-2A Program, Florida Department of Transportation, Wage and Hour (by the appropriate District) and Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation.

Please notify your employees and crew leaders of the meetings and encourage them to attend. Subordinate crew leaders are also invited.
TAMPA WAGE AND HOUR DISTRICT:

December 6, 2010, 5:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.
Wauchula, FL, at the Hardee County Civic Center, 515 Civic Center Dr., Wauchula, FL, for all agricultural employers.

December 7, 2010, 5:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.
Winter Haven, FL, at the Florida Citrus Building, 500 3rd Street NW, Winter Haven, FL, in the Nora Mayo Hall, for all agricultural employers.

December 8, 2010, 5:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.
Dover, FL, at the Florida Strawberry Education and Event Center, 13138 Lewis Gallagher Road, Dover, FL, for all agricultural employers.

Follow SW Florida Vegetable Grower on Facebook

SW Florida Vegetable Grower is now on Facebook providing up-to-date news for vegetable growers and industry reps on the go!

This is the place to find what you need to know about growing vegetables in SW Florida. Bringing you the most up-to-date news; about varieties, pest control tactics, tips and breaking news, to help make you a more successful grower.

Relevant, timely information and discussion topics that help the fruit and vegetable industry understand how to succeed in this dynamic and ever-changing business.

Follow us on Facebook at http://www.facebook.com/pages/SW-Florida-Vegetable-Grower/149291468443385

Facebook is a social networking website with more than 500 million active users in July 2010, which is about one person for every fourteen in the world. In the US, almost over 100 million people use Facebook. For the younger crowd (whether in age or spirit), its use is nearly universal. Your kids are on it, many of your friends too. Check it out and get with the times!

South Florida Vegetable Pest and Disease Hotline – if you get the hotline second hand from another source you may be missing the Quotable Quotes and the Lighter Side – to subscribe direct – email gmcavoy@ufl.edu

Up Coming Meetings

Hillsborough County

December 14, 2010
New Fumigant Regulations Training
Lunch 11:30-12:30
Meeting: 12:30-4:30

UF/IFAS Gulfcoast Research and Education Center
CR 672
Wimauma, Florida

Register for free at http://fumigantsession.eventbrite.com or email ccooley@ufl.edu
Palm Beach County

December 7, 2010  Basil Weed Trial Field Day  9:00 – 11:00 AM

Alderman Farms

Directions: On west side HY441, ¼ mile south of Heritage Farm Rd/Hypoluxo Rd. You can see the red flagged field from HY441.

Southwest Florida

December 7, 2010  Fall Vegetable Field day

UF/IFAS SW Florida Research and Education Center
Hwy 29 N
Immokalee, Florida

Opportunities

Farm Land for Lease

Farm Land for lease in LaBelle area – contact Clyde Lavender at 863-673-2338

Farm Land for lease on Babcock Ranch, Hwy 31, Charlotte County. Rotational fields or permanent locations, phone 941-639-3958

15 acres along Highway 17 available for rent or lease. Please contact Lora Allison at 941-920-5728 (cell) or email at medsolla@verizon.net

Help Wanted:

Field Development Position United Phosphorus, Inc.

Field Development Representative, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina.

Minimum of 5 years experience working with AgChem products in high value crops. Position responsible for technical service of sales and implementing product development projects within the assigned region.

Responsibilities will include the monitoring and evaluation of plant protection technologies and development of new label use instructions for new and existing products.

Candidates will be responsible for the compilation, interpretation and presentation of project data in written and oral formats. Tasks will also include support of sales personnel within the region by conducting meetings, tours, and demonstrations as requested.

Advanced degree in Plant Sciences (Entomology, Plant Pathology, or Plant Physiology). Strong inter-personal and communication skills with researchers, regulatory, marketing and sales community. No closing date. This position will remain open until filled.

Submit resume to:
Websites

The Hand That Feeds U.S. - The Hand that Feeds U.S. is an educational resource for urban media on the importance of U.S. agriculture to the security and future of our country. The website provides information relevant to our nation's farming industry, while also seeking to combat the current misinformation campaigns about food prices and renewable fuels. Check it out at http://www.thehandthatfeedsus.org/aboutus.cfm

National Weather Service – Access the latest weather forecasts, alerts and warnings – go to http://www.nws.noaa.gov/

Quotable Quotes

Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood. – Fred Rogers

A man who has never gone to school may steal from a freight car; but if he has a university education, he may steal the whole railroad. – Theodore Roosevelt

Don't hit at all if it is honorably possible to avoid hitting; but never hit soft. – Theodore Roosevelt

If you could kick the person in the pants responsible for most of your trouble, you wouldn't sit for a month. – Theodore Roosevelt

Old age is like everything else. To make a success of it, you've got to start young. – Theodore Roosevelt

On the Lighter Side

Speeding in Arkansas

A young woman was pulled over for speeding. An Arkansas State Trooper walked to her car window, flipping open his ticket book. She said, 'I bet you are going to sell me a ticket to the State Trooper's Ball.' He replied, 'Arkansas State Troopers don't have balls.' There was a moment of silence. He then closed his book, got back in his patrol car and left.

Love

A brother and sister had made their usual hurried, obligatory pre-Christmas visit to the little farm where dwelt their elderly parents with their small herd of horses. The farm was where they had grown up and had been named Lone Pine Farm because of the huge pine, which topped the hill behind the farm. Through the years the tree had become a talisman to the old man and his wife, and a landmark in the countryside. The young siblings had fond memories of their childhood here, but the city hustle and bustle added more excitement to their lives, and called them away to a different life.

The old folks no longer showed their horses, for the years had taken their toll, and getting out to the barn on those frosty mornings was getting harder, but it gave them a reason to get up in the mornings and a reason to
live. They sold a few foals each year, and the horses were their reason for joy in the morning and contentment at day's end.

Angry, as they prepared to leave, the young couple confronted the old folks "Why do you not at least dispose of 'The Old One'. She is no longer of use to you. It's been years since you've had foals from her. You should cut corners and save so you can have more for yourselves. How can this old worn out horse bring you anything but expense and work? Why do you keep her anyway?"

The old man looked down at his worn boots, holes in the toes, scuffed at the barn floor and replied, “Yes, I could use a pair of new boots”. His arm slid defensively about the Old One's neck as he drew her near with gentle caressing he rubbed her softly behind her ears. He replied softly, "We keep her because of love. Nothing else, just love."

Baffled and irritated, the young folks wished the old man and his wife a Merry Christmas and headed back toward the city as darkness stole through the valley.

The old couple shook their heads in sorrow that it had not been a happy visit. A tear fell upon their cheeks. How is it that these young folks do not understand the peace of the love that filled their hearts?

So it was, that because of the unhappy leave-taking, no one noticed the insulation smoldering on the frayed wires in the old barn. None saw the first spark fall. None but the "Old One".

In a matter of minutes, the whole barn was ablaze and the hungry flames were licking at the loft full of hay. With a cry of horror and despair, the old man shouted to his wife to call for help as he raced to the barn to save their beloved horses. But the flames were roaring now, and the blazing heat drove him back. He sank sobbing to the ground, helpless before the fire's fury. His wife back from calling for help cradled him in her arms, clinging to each other, they wept at their loss.

By the time the fire department arrived, only smoking, glowing ruins were left, and the old man and his wife, exhausted from their grief, huddled together before the barn. They were speechless as they rose from the cold snow covered ground. They nodded thanks to the firemen as there was nothing anyone could do now. The old man turned to his wife, resting her white head upon his shoulders as his shaking old hands clumsily dried her tears with a frayed red bandana. Brokenly he whispered, "We have lost much, but God has spared our home on this eve of Christmas. Let us gather strength and climb the hill to the old pine where we have sought comfort in times of despair. We will look down upon our home and give thanks to God that it has been spared and pray for our beloved most precious gifts that have been taken from us.

And so, he took her by the hand and slowly helped her up the snowy hill as he brushed aside his own tears with the back of his old and withered hand.

The journey up the hill was hard for their old bodies in the steep snow. As they stepped over the little knoll at the crest of the hill, they paused to rest; looking up to the top of the hill the old couple gasped and fell to their knees in amazement at the incredible beauty before them.

Seemingly, every glorious, brilliant star in the heavens was caught up in the glittering, snow-frosted branches of their beloved pine, and it was aglow with heavenly candles. And poised on its top most bough, a crystal crescent moon glistened like spun glass. Never had a mere mortal created a Christmas tree such as this. They were breathless as the old man held his wife tighter in his arms.

Suddenly, the old man gave a cry of wonder and incredible joy. Amazed and mystified, he took his wife by the hand and pulled her forward. There, beneath the tree, in resplendent glory, a mist hovering over and glowing in
the darkness was their Christmas gift. Shadows glistening in the night light.

Bedded down about the "Old one" close to the trunk of the tree, was the entire herd, safe.

At the first hint of smoke, she had pushed the door ajar with her muzzle and had led the horses through it. Slowly and with great dignity, never looking back, she had led them up the hill, stepping cautiously through the snow. The foals were frightened and dashed about. The skittish yearlings looked back at the crackling, hungry flames, and tucked their tails under them as they licked their lips and hopped like rabbits. The mares that were in foal with a new year’s crop of babies, pressed uneasily against the "Old One" as she moved calmly up the hill and to safety beneath the pine. And now she lay among them and gazed at the faces of the old man and his wife.

Those she loved she had not disappointed. Her body was brittle with years, tired from the climb, but the golden eyes were filled with devotion as she offered her gift... Because of love. Only Because of love.

Tears flowed as the old couple shouted their praise and joy... and again the peace of love filled their hearts.

**Note:** State and local budgets cuts are threatening to further reduce our funding — if you are currently receiving the hotline by mail and would like to switch over to electronic delivery — just drop me an email. It is much quicker and you will get the hotline with in minutes of my completing it and help conserve dwindling resources at the same time. Thanks to those that have already made the switch.

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