Wet Gardens
By Ed Lentz – OSU Extension, Hancock County

Besides farmers' fields, gardens and yards have also been affected by the continuation of wet weather. Some tips to consider if your garden has been affected by heavy rains:

1. Under saturated conditions, mulch should be pulled back from around plants or removed from beds entirely. This will allow the soil to dry out faster.

2. Plants that have been in saturated soils for several weeks will benefit from aerating the root zone. A garden fork may be used for this task. Drive the tines straight down into the soil about 8 inches and pull straight out in numerous places around the plants and shrubs.

   Do not dig with the fork, but make as many holes as seems practical. This technique provides air to the roots and encourages the soil to dry faster. Holes may also be made by a metal rod or wooden dowel.

3. Pests such as snails and slugs thrive and reproduce rapidly during wet conditions. They can be removed by hand when seen or captured in a bowl or tuna can half-filled with beer that has been placed in a hole with the rim even with the soil surface. Beer attracts the slug and it drowns in the container of brew.

4. Heavy rains over an extended period may leach available nutrients from the soil in the landscape, especially nitrogen and potash. Additional fertilizer may be needed but wait until plants have recovered from the rains.

   It is generally recommended not to fertilize trees and shrubs after August, since the extra nutrients may make them less winter hardy. Do consider fertilizing bedding plants and vegetable gardens, if needed.

5. Do not consume any vegetables that may have come in contact with floodwater. Bacterial contaminants may be in the water. Leafy and some fleshy vegetables, such as lettuce, cabbage, mustard, kale, collards, spinach, celery, tomatoes, summer squash, and peppers, are highly susceptible to bacterial contamination.

   Root, bulb and tuber crops, such as beets, carrots, radishes, turnips, onions and potatoes are less susceptible to bacterial contamination. Disinfect these vegetables, peel and cook them thoroughly before eating.

   Produce with a protected fruit or impervious outer skin such as peas, melons, eggplant, sweet corn or winter squash should be washed and disinfected before the outer shell, skin or husk is removed. Then shell, peel or husk the produce and cook if possible

6. Gardeners should take extra precautions to use good personal-hygiene when working in gardens that may have been flooded. Wash hands after gardening. Leave garden shoes at the door, and change clothing after working in a flooded area.

   Avoid contact with flood waters, including the soil, as much as possible. Young children can be at a high risk for flood related contaminants. If a garden plot has been flooded, consider either not having young children in the garden with you or take precautions to utilize good personal hygienic practices.

7. Newly planted seeds and transplants may not survive even short-term flooding, and seeds may have washed away. Resist the urge to replant immediately; give the soil a chance to dry out first. Working wet soil often has negative long term effects such as soil compaction.

8. Many snakes are left homeless after a flood. They may seek food and shelter in debris caused by the flood or yard cleanup. Watch where you put your hands and feet when removing or cleaning debris.

9. Heavy rains often create long standing pools of water, breeding grounds for disease carrying mosquitoes. Change water in birdbaths, flowerpots, and buckets after heavy rains and check for any item that may collect water such as tires to minimize breeding sites.

10. Bees, wasps, and hornets may have had their nests disturbed by excessive wind and rain. The insects can become very aggressive. Before beginning clean up, survey the site to see if these insects are hovering in the area. Take necessary precautions to avoid them.

In addition to the obvious damage to plants, there are more long-term effects to soils, which have been flooded for extended periods. Soil microorganisms that require oxygen may be killed and those that survive without oxygen take over, which in turn affects availability of nutrients for plant use. Soil structure may be changed for a period of time.

It will be difficult to know the full effect of the heavy rains in the area until things begin to dry out. And then, of course, a lot will depend on what future stresses the weather may bring to the garden and yard.

I want to acknowledge Sarah Noggle, OSU Extension Agriculture and Natural Resources Educator in Paulding County for preparing the original list that I have adapted for this article.