



lastword

by Lucy de la Pasture

Rain? What's that?

Over the years, I've come to learn the two golden rules when putting pen to paper for this column — don't mention the weather and never discuss politics. Both are likely to leave you with egg on your face, as the three weeks it takes between me writing this and you reading it is an eternity in either of these spheres!

So ignoring my own advice, mostly because if I write this then it's bound to cause that wet stuff to fall from the sky, and I really won't mind that it would make these musings a bit irrelevant. It's as dry as a crisp here in North Herefordshire. Just like walking through a desert, the oasis that glimmers on the horizon keeps getting further away as any promised rain fades into just a few dribs and drabs. It's drier than I can ever remember an autumn, and there's been a fair many of them...

A few fields away, I've been watching a crop of oilseed rape that was quite literally bashed into the ground a month ago — a lot of diesel was burned that day, for sure. Anyway, it seems to be getting browner by the day...

Looking at our grassland

here, it's no surprise.

Even that is going backwards at a time of year when it should be having its last hoorah.

Earlier on this spring, we had more grass than mouths to eat it and I was feeling a little smug while my sister, who farms on the sandy land in the south of the county, was struggling to find enough of a crop to make silage. Even after the first heatwave, we still had grass on our heavy land while others were struggling. It was happy days.

Then just before the second, more prolonged spell of hot weather, it suddenly began to feel the pinch and I remember thinking that the heat might just finish it off. And it did. We still haven't had enough rain here for things to change dramatically and things are getting pretty tight — not a great way to go onto winter. Meanwhile, my sister's burnt savannahs have mercifully gone green again as a few more drops of rain have fallen in that direction. Although I have grass envy, I know she's going into winter having fed a lot of her precious fodder just to keep the stock going during the summer.

Even big farmers are having similar problems, especially as it's been too dry in many cases to plant the normal catch crops which give grazing a bit of a chance to catch a breath in autumn.

On the plus side, the hedgerows are laden with berries of all descriptions, having once looked like they'd disappoint. Even the apples are late this year but have used every drop of moisture this past month to swell to a more normal size.

Round and about, the Herefordshire hedges are

receiving their usual close attention. Here, it's a more relaxed affair. With so many berries on the hedges, it seems wrong to cut them all off and so it's the usual dilemma — cut them while the ground will travel or risk it in the spring, when most years there's zero chance of getting a tractor on this ground before the end of February. At least the birds will be well fed!

Birdlife is in abundance here and has noticeably increased with our somewhat lax hedgecutting regime (one in two or three years, depending on spring conditions). We also boast eight species of bats and newts of every species. But what is noticeably missing this year is the rabbits. They have disappeared completely. Is that because badgers (damn things) have moved in and skewed the balance? I don't know, but Mrs Tiggywinkle has also disappeared and instead, we have a badger that has taken to visiting the garden at night, in spite of our best efforts to keep it out. Tips on

Based in Ludlow, Shrops, Lucy de la Pasture has worked as an agronomist, while among the Twitterati, she's **@Lucy_delaP**.

lucy@cpm-magazine.co.uk

a postcard please!

But back to the weather, there's another reason that a dry winter would be bad news for us. We, and many houses and farms in the vicinity, are all reliant on private water supplies. Our borehole is running low and that's not good news. I have no idea how much rain is needed to fill up the groundwater reserves and I'm keeping everything crossed the earth keeps on giving otherwise we're in a whole world of pain.

And lo and behold, it's raining — and it looks like proper rain. I knew mentioning the drought would work but not before I've even got to the bottom of the page. Perhaps I should have written about politics...

They may have left their run a little late this year, but it's been a berry bonanza during September, with hedges laden with juicy bounty.

