

# Gardening Tips and Tricks and Home Horticulture

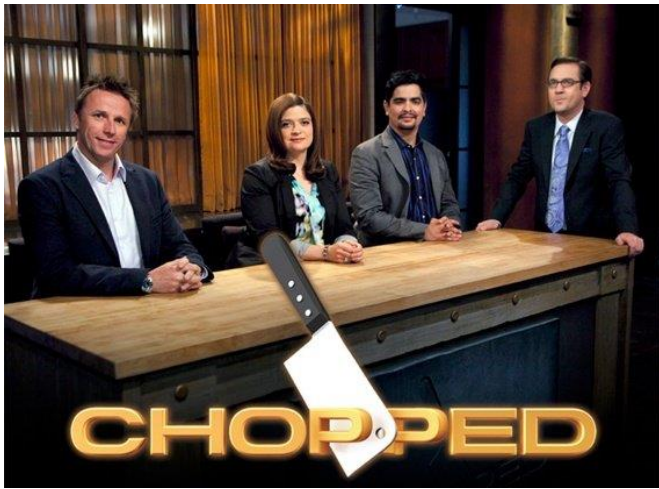
February 2025 Issue

Written and compiled by Ricky D. Kemery, Allen County Extension Educator Retired, phone: 260-431-6893

**Ricky's Gardening Tips and Tricks and Home Horticulture** is an online newsletter designed to provide citizens of Allen County and northeastern Indiana with up-to-date information about Horticulture and home issues, written in a lighthearted style! To subscribe, send an email to [kemery7@frontier.com](mailto:kemery7@frontier.com).

---

## Soil and Travel / Food Shows



I spend a lot of time watching travel shows and cooking shows on television – often until the wee hours of the morning. The issue with this is that it is impossible to watch the food shows without becoming hungry and wanting a late night snack. I drive my friend Gwendra crazy with late night requests for cereal, sandwiches, sherbert. I would eat a cow if it were possible.

Anyway watching food shows proves to me once again on how important good soil is for tasty food, Soil is what makes food taste different depending on the climate and soils. Soil is the reason why wine from California tastes different from the same wine from the same grapes grown in Indiana.

Studies have shown that food grown in great soil tastes better and is more nutritious than food grown on “crappy” soil. The way to convert crappy soils into good soils is by adding organic matter of some sort to the existing soil – whether it is in a raised bed or existing garden soil on the level. In our area Canadian sphagnum peat moss, compost, and aged manure are the best bets. Even rotting leaves, clean straw, and untreated grass clippings can be valuable to enrich soils. Think about it when you watch all those episodes of Chopped.

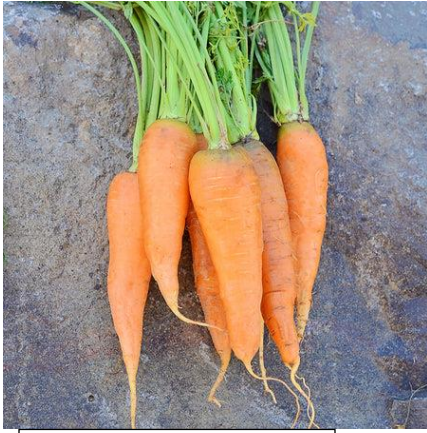
**Recipe:** 2 bales peat moss, 1 bushel basket of rotted manure, 1 bushel basket of compost per 10x10 (100 square foot) area. Other wise for raised beds just layer material plus grass clippings, paper, straw, leaves, into beds ( 6 inch layers with compost on top). One can even layer materials into burlap bags or large containers to grow carrots, potatoes and other vegetables.

## Carrots

Carrots are believed to be native primarily to Afghanistan. They generally have red, purple, yellow or rarely white roots. These colored carrots are very popular today because they have high amounts of antioxidants. The Dutch, French and English hybridized the colored carrots to develop orange carrots. Why? The “orange” carrot we are all familiar with was developed in the Netherlands during 17th century as a tribute to the ruling Dutch House of Orange. The Dutch orange carrot was also less bitter. The French and English also developed their own varieties of orange carrots. Viva le de orange!



## Carrot Cultivars



**Chantenay**

Chantenay carrot originated from the Chantenay region of France. Up until the 1950's, Chantenays were extremely popular. They can withstand a variety of soil types and are disease and pest resistant. Chantenays are very cold hardy, so they make a good fall carrot in our area. Chantenay carrots were replaced in the 1950's by easier to ship Emperor carrots. Chantenay carrots have shorter roots with broad shoulders and rounded tips; rich, sweet flavor and good storage potential. Red-Cored Chantenay', 'Hercules', and 'Carson Hybrid' are a few examples.



**Danvers**

Danvers carrots are a "newer" carrot developed in Danvers, Massachusetts in the late 1800's. They are long skinny carrots. They are more tolerant of poorer rockier soils. 'Danvers Half Long' and 'Yellowstone' are common Danvers varieties.

Imperator carrots (right) varieties take a bit longer to mature. Imperator carrots are the classic long, tapered roots you see in stores. Imperator carrots need very loose soil to grow properly. A deep raised bed or sandy soils work well for Imperators. They are good storing carrots 'Autumn King', 'Atomic Red', 'Yellowstone', and 'Purple Haze' are common Imperator varieties.



**Imperator**

Nantes carrots are probably the best carrots to try in heavier clay soils. They have straight roots less susceptible to forking. They are less likely to form pithy cores

when left in the field. 'Early Nantes', 'Nelson', Chantenay, and Kaleidoscope Mix' are examples of Nantes type carrots. Nantes is the capital of western Loire, France. The author Jules Verne is a Nantes native.



**Nantes**

Carrots did not become a regular part of the American diet until after the world wars, when American soldiers brought back seeds of carrots from Europe. Currently, the largest producer and exporter of carrots in the world is China

The key to growing carrots is to have loose deep well-drained soil (a deep raised bed or (a large container works very well) so the carrots can develop properly. When sowing carrots use sawdust or vermiculite to cover the seeds so the seeds can develop properly.



# Basic Lawn Care

Lawns will begin to grow in earnest when daytime temperatures are reliably in the sixties and soil temperatures reach 55 degrees. This is because photosynthesis - using energy from the sun to make sugar for plant processes - begins when temperatures are above 55 degrees. These conditions are when turfgrass is at its happiest. Beginning in mid-April the lawn will need its first mowing and fertilization. A slow release fertilizer should be used to reduce nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorous from entering water sheds such as ponds, rivers, and lakes.



Broadleaf weed control and crabgrass are always an issue with homeowners. In my opinion, treating the entire lawn for crabgrass just because it is on a “schedule” is a waste of resources. If crabgrass has not been an issue, then I would spot treat any areas with a post emergent control if crabgrass appears later in stressed areas. Instead of treating the entire lawn for a few broadleaf weeds; I would again spot treat those weeds instead of treating the entire lawn. If you have a healthy lawn, then weed pressure should be minimal. As I have mentioned in previous articles, pesticides that kill things do have an impact on everyone who is exposed - including all your neighbors who breathe the drift and track in the pesticide after it is applied. Children and pets are especially vulnerable to broadleaved pesticide residue.

The forecast for this summer is for slightly above-average temperatures with average precipitation. Mid-summer is when lawns are the most unhappy. This is because bluegrass grows best when it is cool. When daytime temperatures are eighty degrees and higher, the lawn slows down and sometimes just stops. In general, it is not a great time to push the lawn with fertilizer - unless there have been periods of heavy rainfall. I would not treat the lawn with preventative grub controls unless grubs and Japanese beetles have been an issue in your area. These types of pesticides are especially toxic to bees.

Early fall and late fall are especially good times to fertilize the lawn. For some reason, research has shown that the turf uses nutrients from fertilizer to grow healthy roots, even in the following spring.

More lawn care companies are now offering organic lawn care or hybrid care with some organic and conventional lawn maintenance. Your lawn might not be quite pristine, but in the big scheme of things - what is better? A perfect lawn that requires major pesticide and fertilizer input? Or a healthy less perfect lawn that is more environmentally friendly for everyone.

## Handy Dandy Newspaper

When constructing a raised bed garden, I like to use newspaper at the bottom of the raised bed frame to smother the grass without using herbicides. Just lay several layers in opposite directions at the bottom of a raised bed. Moisten the paper so it doesn't blow away. I then place hardware cloth over the paper to keep small critters out of the garden.

I also use newspapers to build soil in a lasagna gardening system. I shred the paper in strips, and then build a layer - along with 6-8 inch deep layers of peat moss, compost, grass clippings, clean



straw, and rotted manure to build a great raised bed soil. Paper from the office or home shredder is great to use in this manner – and also can be added to the compost bin.



I do not use shiny colored paper in gardens, because the shiny colors can contain some trace amounts of heavy metals. Regular colored paper is fine.

Layered newspapers can be a great weed control barrier in landscape or garden beds and pathways. After laying down the paper in bare areas, use 3-inch deep layers of compost, mulch, or wet leaves to hold down the paper and provide additional control. Paper layers (along with mulch) may also be used around trees to provide weed control. The paper breaks down over time and adds organic matter into the soil around the plant. It is important not to pile paper and mulch around the base of plants, as this can result in poor growth and development of the plant.

Weed barrier fabrics may also be used, but they are more expensive. In addition, I have seen weed barriers hold too much moisture around trees and shrubs because they just don't allow as much air into the root zone in wet years. Try not to use garbage bags as a mulch. They do not allow air into the root zone; and can again trap too much moisture around the plant in wet years.



Paper can be used to make planting pots by either using a tool (Burpee Seed Company) to fold the paper, or by making paper Mache plant pots.

Shredded paper makes a great bedding base for your worm compost bin.

Some gardeners grow vegetables such as leeks, asparagus, and peas using a trench system. Using shredded paper at the bottom of the trenches helps provide moisture and nutrients to the plants.

<http://www.naturalbuildingblog.com/beanvetiver-borders-with-compostearthworm-trenches/> To stop the birds eating newly sown seeds,

some gardeners cover them with a small amount of paper from a shredder.

Use paper to enhance the growth of plants, and to be more sustainable in your garden and landscape.

## Spuds for Us

Gardeners in N/E Indiana can begin to plant potatoes around Mid-March, depending on the weather. Obviously, if there is a foot of snow on the ground (heaven forbid) one has to wait. However, if the ground isn't frozen, then go ahead and plant. Potatoes prefer cool weather to develop.

In my opinion, one gets the best bang for the dollar by ordering and planting gourmet seed potatoes such as Yukon Gold, Red Pontiac, and Kennebec. These potatoes can be quite pricey at the stores. Sometimes one can find seed potatoes at local garden centers, and many companies have gourmet seed potatoes online. There is less chance of disease with named varieties. Organic potatoes at the grocery – especially if they are beginning to sprout – are great to use.





One can cut the seed potatoes into smaller pieces with each piece containing an “eye”. The eye is the actual growing point on the potato that will sprout. Many folks allow the cut pieces to “cure” a few days in a warm place- and some gardeners dust the cut pieces with garden sulfur to reduce the chance of rotting.

Potatoes can be planted in rows in loose soil, about 15 inches apart and 8-12 inches in depth. Potatoes can also be planted in mounded soil, in deep containers, in hay bales, or even old tires. The main thing is to make sure no sunlight will reach the developing potatoes. This can cause a chemical called solanine to build up – causing the potatoes to become green. Green potatoes = stomachache.

Keep a sheet of thick plastic nearby to cover the potatoes in case of a late spring freeze or frost. The emerging foliage can be killed by cold weather. Also purchase a can of Dipel Dust at your local garden center. This environmentally-friendly material should be sprinkled periodically on the foliage to kill any Colorado potato beetle larvae that might try to munch on the foliage. These larvae can also develop into adult beetles, which are very difficult to control.

One can harvest potatoes in early summer for what are called “new” potatoes, which are delicious. Most of the time, potatoes are harvested in mid-summer, about a week after the foliage begins to turn brown and die back. Use what is called a spading pitchfork (has blunt tines) to carefully dig the potatoes. Allow the potatoes to “cure” in a warm area before storing in a cool, dark area.

Have your children help you plant potatoes this March and have them taste test the potatoes later on. They might be surprised to learn that growing your own food can be very good thing.



## Meadow-In-A- Can – Yes You Can



Meadow-in-a-can wildflowers contain mostly annual seeds of flowers native to western regions of the U.S. and some species native to Europe. The word “wildflower” can have many connotations depending on what company is selling the seed and how they interpret the meaning of what a wildflower is. When I was at Purdue University, I ordered meadow-in-a-can see from Applewood seed company in Texas which provides seeds for many meadow-in-a-can wildflower seed mixes. They are but one company where one can order seeds. In any wildflower seed mix it is the germination percentage rate that is important so one knows roughly that the seed you purchase is viable.

Meadow-in-a-can seed mixes usually contain species such as cosmos-both tall and shorter sulfur cosmos varieties. Cosmos is a plant that needs shorter days to germinate, so the flowers appear later in the season. When I was looking at different species of wildflowers in my graduate work at Purdue University, cosmos was far and above the most reliable species for tougher areas in our field plots.

The mixes usually contain several annual poppies - corn poppy and the California poppy – one of my favorite poppy species. Poppies prefer cooler weather so they usually appear in early spring. Annual baby’s breath, bachelor’s button, blue and scarlet flax, and lesser known species such as baby blue eyes, clarkia, and dwarf coreopsis, Some regional mixes do contain some perennials such as black-eyed Susan, coneflower, and blazing star.

Speaking of planting, it is best to start with a clean weed free planting bed. I usually will place layers of newspaper over an area, and then place approximately 6-12 inches of good topsoil or compost over the newspaper. One can also create a bed using the lasagna method that I have described previously in my articles.

Press the seed lightly into the soil and then keep the area moist by “spritzing” or lightly watering the area so the surface of the planting bed remains moist. Only begin to water more deeply when the seedlings produce true leaves. Meadow-in -a can mixes can produce plantings that provide a riot of color for the entire season. Some seeds will germinate the following spring, but usually additional seedlings are required to keep the area fresh.



Clarkia



Scarlet Flax

Some online sources offer wildflower seed mats – where the seed is embedded into paper or cloth mats. All one has to do is to lay the mat over bare soil, cover the mat with some soil, and water the mat until the seedlings emerge,

There are other types of wildflowers, but meadow-in-a-can wildflowers provide quick and lasting color to any landscape with little effort.

## Saffron

Saffron is one of the most precious spices in the world. The spice originates from a flower called *crocus sativus*—commonly known as the "saffron crocus." - commonly called fall crocus – since thi type of crocus flowers later in the season compared with the spring flowering coccus we are all familiar with. It is believed that saffron originated and was first cultivated in Greece, but today the spice is primarily grown in Iran, Greece, Morocco, and India.



Pigments made with a variety of crocus flowers have been found in prehistoric cave paintings in Iraq dating back about 50,000 years ago.

Fall crocus was first domesticated in Greece in approximately 1700 BCE. Many ancient Minoan art pieces depict saffron, including the fresco of blue monkeys picking saffron.

International trade brought saffron from the present-day Middle East and Mediterranean to Spain, Hundreds of years later, saffron could be found everywhere from the fields of England to Russia

Saffron is derived from hand harvesting the tiny stigmas from the fall Crocus. Saffron is expensive not because it's difficult to grow, but because of the labor and tedious timing necessary to extract the stigmas from the flower. The prized reddish orange "stigmas" stem from the middle of the plant a few weeks after the flower blooms, and they must be harvested at mid-morning, when the flower is fully open to the Sun.



It takes between 70,000 and 200,000 flowers to produce one kilogram of dried saffron threads. The flowers must be picked by hand in the early hours of the morning and the stigmas removed for drying. It takes around 370–470 hours of work to produce 1 kg of dried saffron

Saffron is most famously known for its culinary properties. It's the cornerstone flavor in many dishes from around the world, ranging from paella to biryani. Saffron can also be used to dye clothing items or skin. For Hindus, saffron is one of the most sacred colors, and is sometimes "applied as a red dye to the forehead," It was used to color marriage robes." Buddhist monks, too, famously wear robes the color of saffron,

The primary producers of saffron are Iran, India, and Greece.

The traditional method of using saffron is to grind 2 tsp. saffron threads, along with a sugar cube or a pinch of coarse salt, to a powder with a mortar and pestle or a spice mill to draw out the most flavor and color. Then add ¼ cup warm water and let cool. One can also just add the threads directly to vegetables, rice, or soups.

## Ricky's Chicken and Rice Soup with Saffron

I first saw chicken and rice being cooked on the PBS T.V. show "A Chef's Life". The show's host, Vivian Howard, cooked chicken and rice with her mother on the show. Chicken and Rice was a regular menu item in the Carolinas and other regions in the southern United States. Folks would stretch menu items like chicken with rice to make a more filling item to feed a larger family.

The recipes were variations of Smothered chicken and rice - a favorite in the South - and has been loved for generations. It's known for its rich taste and significant portions. This dish is comfort food, showing the South's warmth and welcome. The dish features golden-brown, tender chicken pieces drenched in a rich, creamy gravy. It is served over fluffy white rice, garnished with fresh parsley, and surrounded by colorful vegetables like bell peppers and green beans. My recipe uses the idea of smothered chicken to make a delicious soup with additional twists.



## Chicken and Rice Soup

### Ingredients:

3-4 chicken Thighs or Drumsticks

2-3 carrots sliced into ½ inch pieces

1 cup chopped Celeriac – I found this at Meijers near Parkview North complex - regular celery will work

2-3 onions – chopped not diced

1 cup of long grain white rice

2 containers of chicken Broth

¾ stick of organic unsalted butter

Salt/Pepper to taste

2 tablespoons lemon juice freshly squeezed if possible

### Spices- fresh if you have them

1 tablespoon thyme

1 tablespoon rosemary

½ teaspoon basil

1 teaspoon hot pepper flakes

½ teaspoon Paprika – not smoked

1 tablespoon saffron I just place the threads directly into the soup

1 tablespoon – Chicken Better Than Bullion



### Instructions:

Melt butter in Dutch Oven then add chicken and vegetables

Cook until the veggies are softened and chicken is slightly browned

Add rice and broth and then spices

Bring to a boil and then simmer for approximately 45 minutes – or until chicken and vegetables are tender and rice is cooked try not to overcook rice.

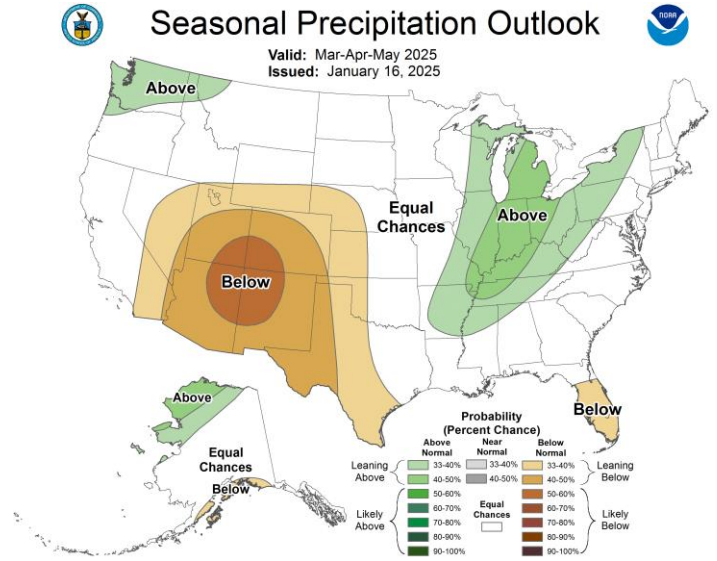
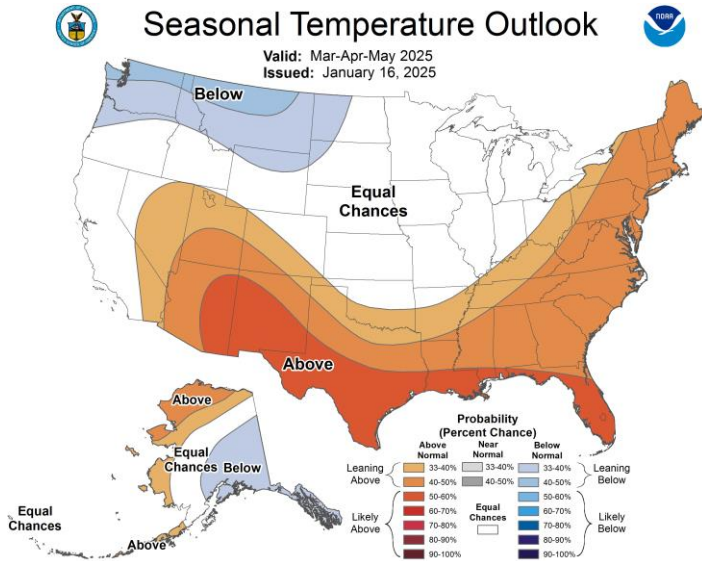
Take out chicken and shred with two forks, then put the chicken back in

Add lemon juice

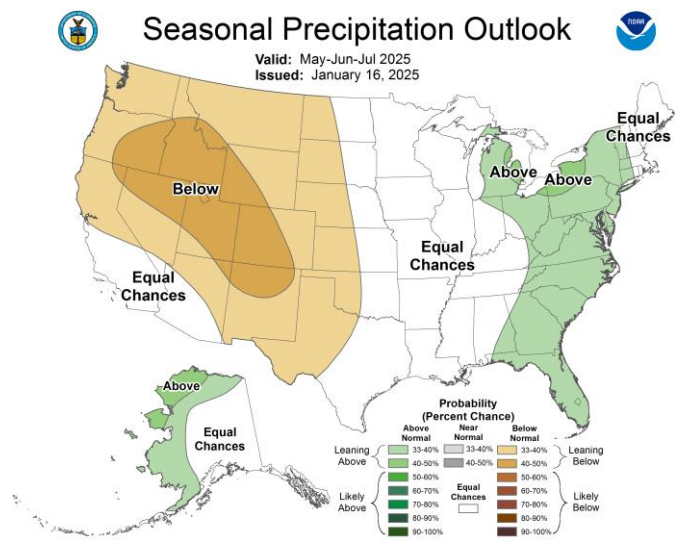
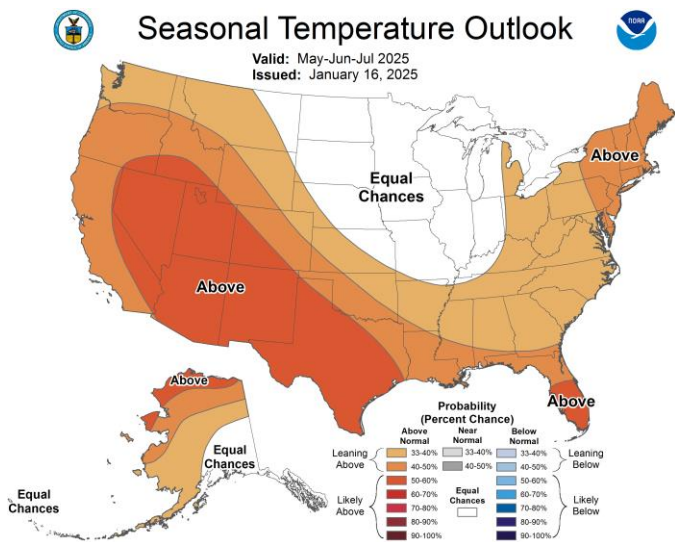
Enjoy! You might have to add more broth if/when soup is reheated as rice will soak up some liquid.

# Weather

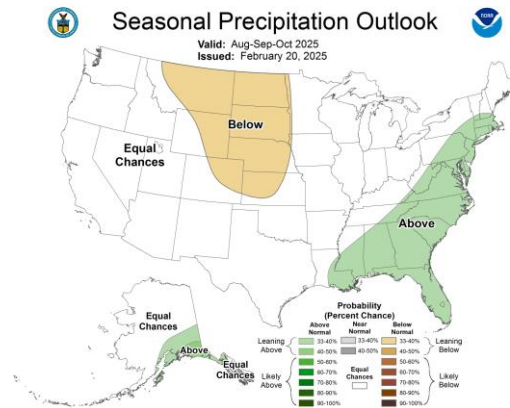
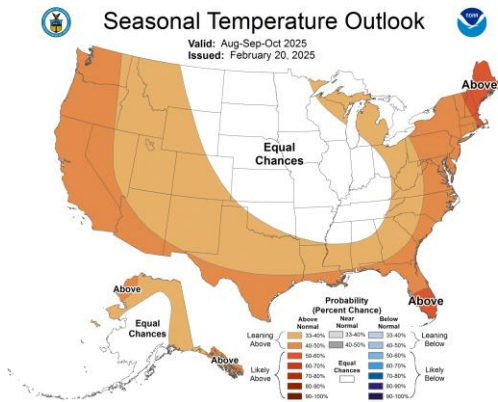
La Niña conditions are expected to persist in the near-term, with a transition to ENSO-neutral likely sometime during March-May 2025 (66% chance). In the near term temperature should be at near normal trending to slightly below normal. Precipitation should be above normal, so we should expect a wet spring.



Below one can see the trend continue with our area being on the edge of above average temps and precipitation.



Maps from July – September show equal chance for above or below average temperatures . In other words pigs can fly – there are equal chances for that happening later this year.



## Hoggles – Demented Cat Logic

*To my Caregiver: You might not be aware of my southern heritage. I have disguised the drawl in my meow. No matter – I furthermore declare and demand I be served Chicken and Rice in addition to my regular premier cat food for every meal. I would be most grateful. Bless your little heart –*

*To subscribe to this electronic newsletter, ask questions, send an email to kemeryr7@frontier.com - or text 260-431-6893. I will not share information with others. Ricky Kemery will not knowingly discriminate in any way based on race, gender etc*