*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Frost brings growing season to sudden end**

My footsteps made soft crunching noises as I walked across a frosty white carpet. A waning moon was visible in the early-morning sky.

In the early hours of Oct. 4, the growing season ended in our valley as temperatures landed in the upper-20s. I awoke to a layer of white frost coating the lawn.

I consider it a long season when we reach the month of October without having a hard frost, which usually comes by the second week of September. Our last frost of spring this year was in mid-May, and as late as May 31, we narrowly escaped temperatures in the mid-30s.

As I carried a bale of hay across the frozen grass, the morning sun was rising above the ridge. Our cows, goats and donkeys were happy to see the hay because their pasture has grown thin. Soon they’ll be on hay, continuing for the next few months. The two pigs were huddled together but quickly rushed toward their dish when I brought in a pail of feed. In the span of a few months, they have grown to more than 200 pounds and will soon be butchered.

Inside the chicken coop, the hens eagerly pecked at their grain. Their egg production that averaged a dozen or more eggs per day just a few weeks ago has become half that. I collected six eggs to put into my sweatshirt pockets.

I glanced across the valley to the hillside above the creek. The reds, oranges and yellows of the birch, poplar, maple, elm, hickory and oak were ablaze in the early-morning sun. The warmth of the rays was melting the frost on the gate.

The timing may change slightly each year depending on the weather, but the fall color palette stays the same. Daylight hours diminish; photosynthesis in trees slows and stops. Deciduous leaves dominated by green chlorophyll the rest of the year show the yellows, orange and brown from carotenoid pigments, and the reds from anthocyanins.

Nature moves at her own speed. It took an entire growing season to take those leaves from buds to the end of photosynthesis. But other signs quickly come and go. In less than a week I watched a ring of fungus in our yard pop up, grow, wither and decay. Life moves at all speeds.

The old sheets and towels covering our fall mums were still frosty. We’re trying to extend their season by a few weeks — if the latent heat from the ground will allow them to survive the killer crystals. It was one more night of frost and then temperatures increased back into the 70s by week’s end.

There’s a tinge of sadness that comes with the advance of fall. The change of seasons and the shortening of the days reminds me our days also grow shorter. I think about deeds undone, regrets and shortcomings.

I recall the words I wrote five years ago about fall.

“Life is often as tenuous as the withering stem that holds the leaf to the branch. We know not if we’re in the autumn of our lives or whether spring will come.

“She teases us, autumn does, with her fleeting beauty. ‘Take my hand,’ she whispers through the rustling leaves. So we do and we dance amidst the blazing landscape, leaving our cares and worries behind,if only for a while.”

Yes she’s beautiful. Take time to enjoy the dance.

*Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at chardie1963@gmail.com.*

Cutlines:

102220-agrv-life-hardie-1: A hillside’s changing colors provide a backdrop for fall mums.

102220-agrv-life-hardie-2: A heavy frost covers the Hardie yard.

102220-agrv-life-hardie-3: A hydrangea stands in morning frost.

102220-agrv-life-hardie-4: Fall fungus pops up, grows and withers in the span of a week.

102220-agrv-life-hardie-5: Fungus life is short; life in nature moves at all speeds.

102220-agrv-life-hardie-6: Frost starts to melt from a metal gate as the sun’s rays warm the metal.

102220-agrv-life-hardie-7: Flakes of frost cover the top of a wooden post.