

# The Augusta Chronicle

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## COLUMNS

# Campbell Vaughn: With its hills and valleys, Augusta's climate stands apart in Georgia

**Campbell Vaughn** Columnist

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I just got back to the office from having a little over a week off. It was a lot of fun. My vacations usually mean I spend lots of time doing stuff that I should have done months ago and getting about one-third of it done.

During the 2022 Christmas holidays, I was walking around in one of those survival suites wearing everything I could put on because of the cold. That Christmas' cold was a 30-year storm, and it was brutal.

Those sustained temperatures in the teens with driving winds beat up some plants that were not used to that kind of chill. Trees and shrubs like citrus, palms and bottle brush took a hit, but after all the damage was done, most everything ended up okay in relative terms.

Weird weather is the normal in Augusta. Much of that is about the area's topography.

It is sometimes hard to decipher what really happened statistically climate wise in our area because we have hills and valleys. For instance, we have two airports that are only 9 miles apart but are in hugely different climates. Daniel Field's elevation above sea level is 420 feet and rests on a hill, while Augusta Regional Airport is 135 feet above sea level and is down in a valley on the edge of a swamp along a major river.

The rain in our area was abundant over the past year with 51 inches compared to last year which totaled 41 inches. The number of days it rained was up, too; from 115 days to 123 days.

Just for reference, Augusta's average precipitation is usually around 45 inches a year and is usually the lowest rainfall in Georgia.

The reason we see the lake dropping so much is that the rain in the northern part of the state has not been there. In the very northeastern part of the state in Rabun County, they were down in precipitation. In 2021 that area had 84 inches of rain. In 2022 they had 79 inches and in 2023 they were down to 62 inches of rain. That is a drastic decrease in available water to flow downhill and back into our area.

**Campbell Vaughn:** Learn the stories behind your favorite Christmas plants and trees

We were warmer on average this year by almost 1 degree over last year and up 1.5 degrees from 2021. Our average temperatures are up higher consistently than the average from 1990-2010, which is concerning for many reasons. One or two degrees does not make much difference in our personal well-being, but it makes a huge difference in nature. Warming trends lead to more severe storms, so it is something where we all need to stay prepared.

In fruit production, the key words are chill hours. That is the number of hours the temperature stays under 45 degrees but above freezing.

These accumulated hours help plants receive the level of dormancy they need to produce good blooms. It is a little more complicated than that, but for a 600-word column, let's just go with it. The clock starts in the fall and runs through the bloom in the spring.

In Augusta, our chill hours are a little higher than normal. We are currently at 565 chill hours in the northern part of the CSRA and 470 chill hours a little south. But we have a long way to go before spring. When the chill season is over, peaches need to have 650 to 850 chill hours while rabbiteye blueberries need around 550. In other words, we need to have some cooler weather to make sure we have plenty of peaches for homemade ice cream next summer.