



THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS

2 November 2006

I buried another cat next to our house the other day. It is not, perhaps, quite as bad as it sounds. In my defense, the cat was one of ours and she was dead before I put her in the hole. Somebody's car had seen to that. As for why I would bury her right by the house, I guess it is just a tradition.

Maya is the fourth of our cats to be interred next to the house. I buried Dizzy by the corner of the porch, under a honeysuckle bush. I put Pig Cat next to him. Charlotte is further along, in the corner where the dining room and living room meet, beneath a tree peony. And now Maya is alongside her. I could have buried them all somewhere else on the farm. We have 270 acres. I could have made a cat cemetery up on the eastern end of the farm in the woods with a view through the winter trees to the Vermont mountains. Or in the little orchard by the barns where the cats like to hunt for voles. Or behind the house under the apricot trees. I could have taken a more organic approach and composted them (there are plenty of tips available to dairy farmers on how to compost cows). Or a more Zoroastrian approach and put them on pedestals to be eaten by eagles—or at least turkey vultures.

Instead I bury our cats by the house. We have their memorial bushes conveniently situated to remind us of them (including how irritating, in their own particular feline ways, they all could be). Plus the digging is easy by the foundation.

A thousand years from now archeologists will debate the meaning of these cat skeletons placed at careful intervals around the ancient ruin. Did these people venerate cats? Was the building perhaps a temple to some cat celebrity? Or are the skeletons evidence of ritual cat sacrifices—perhaps some misbegotten attempt to stave off rising sea levels? Maybe these primitive people ate cats and the building was a cat restaurant. Yes the idea that they would have eaten cats sounds farfetched, but keep in mind that they drove SUVs, smoked tobacco, bloated themselves with fizzy sugar liquids and hung out at shopping malls. Clearly they were willing to do almost anything, no matter how bizarre or self-destructive. And so the cat skeleton debate will rage on in academic journals, each specialist certain that he alone has discerned the profound meaning of this mysterious behavior.

There is, I suppose, some comfort in thinking that we do the things we do according to some plan or with some deep purpose in mind. Thus we refuse to believe that Paleolithic man amused himself with random bison doodles on rainy days, preferring to imagine that he was ritualistically decorating the sacred cave with the spirits of his prey.

It is not that people lack for plans and reasons. Plans and reasons are some of the defining characteristics of our species, luxuries afforded us by our cranial capacity, our epoch of good weather and our unprecedented ability to come up with enough food for more than one meal at a time. We have plans and reasons for today, tomorrow and the rest of this life, not to mention the next and even sometimes a few of the previous ones.

I am just a tad skeptical of the extent to which what we actually get done day to day corresponds to what we thought we were going to accomplish when we got up. Plans and reasons may help give some rough shape to our activities, set us off in a particular direction. But contingencies tend to set in before we have gone too far and soon we are caught up in the grim task of getting anywhere at all or simply making a stand wherever we happen to find ourselves.

Perhaps, though, this is just a tired farmer's pessimism. A season of dealing with the weather, the weeds, the deer, internal combustion engines, chickens and the passing moods of vegetable crops tends to hone one's sense of the randomness of daily life. We too had plans and

This week's share: Carrots, Garlic, Horseradish, Kale, Leeks, Lettuce, Onions, Potatoes, Rutabaga, Tatsoi, Winter squash, Sage

reasons when we started the season. We had planting schedules and crop rotations. We had a battery of organic sprays, new pieces of equipment and cover crop seed. We had irrigation lines and row covers. We had varieties chosen for their sturdiness and taste and images of how they would grow derived from the pictures in seed catalogues. We had potent arguments against herbicides and good reasons to believe in compost and carefully timed cultivation. We had plowed fields, piles of seeds and bags to fill. And all that got us well into the middle of April. After that we were just doing what we had to to keep the farm going from one moment to the next.

Not that the ad hoc nature of our efforts resulted in significant disasters. In fact, despite the awful conditions (no farm does well in a wet year, and ours, at the bottom of the hill on heavy soils, does worse than most), we managed to come up with a decent supply of good produce. If little of it matched the images of ideal vegetables I had in mind back in March, the perfect examples of each crop I hoped to put in the bags each week, the fault lies more with my unrealistic expectations than with the actual vegetables themselves. We have put a lot of vegetables in bags this season and I don't feel any compulsion to apologize for many of them. In the end the chaos was no worse than in other years and the vegetables were better.

I certainly have no complaints about how the garlic did. We have had enough to hand it (meaning not just cured heads but also green garlic and scapes) out nearly every week and we just put 245 pounds of it (roughly 9,000 cloves) back into the field for next year's crop.

If anything, I wish we had fewer potatoes. We have never before handed them out in such large quantities (or so clean, thanks to the root vegetable washer, which has worked more or less as planned). Yet we still have close to a ton of them in the barn and another eight rows in the field. We will have a lot of produce for the Community Action food pantry again this year.

We may have had more carrots last year, but I don't remember them tasting as good as this year's crop. I am particularly pleased with the new purple variety, which looks and tastes better than last year's.

Not that I expect most people to cheer, but the rutabagas did far better than last year. Of course, if we had managed to grow only three good ones we would have surpassed last year's crop. But we had a lot more than three, and they stayed a reasonable size (two years ago we had lots of ten pound rutabagas, which make great projectiles but don't really belong in a CSA share).

I expect most people will cheer about how poorly the kale did. I like to think, though, that anyone who gives it a fair try (I would recommend cooking it with lots of onions and a ham hock) can learn to like it.

Instead of boos or applause, I expect many of you will greet the horseradish with puzzlement. How, you may well wonder, did this ugly piece of tree root end up in your bag. Well, it is an ugly piece of root, but you will find that if you peel and grate it and mix it with salt and vinegar you will have some potent horseradish. You may also find, if you inhale too many of the fumes while grating it, that you are temporarily blind.

I think you are pretty safe with most of the other vegetables. I cannot, of course, guarantee that you will like everything you get. Frankly, it would be odd if I could. But I hope that you have enjoyed getting your weekly share, that you have eaten well, that you have noticed that things taste better fresh, that you have appreciated knowing where your food comes from, that you have discovered some new crop or variety and that you have learned something about farming. If so then we have done our job. Maybe not as planned, but done it nonetheless.

In any event, we are done. This is your last bag of the season. If you are still hungry after you finish these vegetables you can contact me about getting more crops (such as some of those potatoes). Otherwise, have a good winter.

Thank you.