



THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS

28 JUNE 2007

Last Friday I planted five crops on about 3 acres of land, using 360 pounds of seed. I am hoping for good, quick germination and lush growth. If all goes well, dense vegetation will cover the patches I seeded in a matter of weeks. I look forward to watching these crops thrive and promise I will do my best to ensure that you don't see any of them in your bag.

Why so miserly? Have I become unhealthily possessive of my plants? Has the stress of farming finally broken my sweet and gentle nature? No, it has not. For a start, I would have to have a sweet and gentle nature. In any event, the stress of farming has not managed to crack my gloomy and irritable one yet either. Nor is my desire to hang onto all these acres of crops unhealthy. In fact, hanging onto them is one of the best things I can do.

Well, that is not really true. I feel sure that if I put my mind to it I could come up with acts of superior moral value such as giving all the produce to the hungry; switching the farm to chicken power; donating my time to rescuing abused gerbils; collecting old Gameboys for distribution to African war orphans who tragically lack any decent way to waste their spare time; or even showing people how to make a decent salad dressing.

But, admirable as all those options might be, they would not do much for the soil on my farm. Hanging onto the crops I just planted will. While my primary task is feeding you, I have to feed the dirt too. All those crops I just planted are dirt food.

Now I suppose the soil would happily eat the same crops you do (whether or not you eat them happily is a separate question). I could have sown swaths escarole. When I plowed the heads in all the soil microbes would have chewed on them contentedly enough even though they were not sautéed in olive oil and garlic. I imagine, however, that 360 pounds of escarole seed would prove prohibitively expensive. I bought 1/8 of an ounce this year, more than enough to last the season, and paid \$5.55. At that price 360 pounds would set me back around \$255,000. Even with a 99.9% bulk discount, it would cost more than the buckwheat, sudan grass, oats, hairy vetch and German millet I got at the Agway down in Schaghticoke.

But it is not just the price. Even if someone gave me sacks of escarole seed I would stick with the crops I chose. Like every other vegetable I have encountered, escarole only grows well with a lot of help and it never grows as well as the weeds. Three acres of untended escarole would quickly turn into three acres of lambs quarters, purslane, Canadian thistle, pigweed and crab grass—five plants I would happily see a great deal less of on the farm.

The crops I planted can outgrow the weeds. I do not say they will. That depends on how well I prepared the field, how well I timed the planting and a little cooperation from the weather. But they all possess the ability to grow so thickly so fast that even the most enthusiastic weeds have no chance.

Last summer I managed to get in only one block of cover crops (the fields were too wet to work most of the time and I was working too much to have time). But that one buckwheat patch did its job. We planted the onions, garlic and winter squash there this year and not only are they doing well so far but there are also remarkably few weeds (compared, in any event, to other parts of the farm)—fewer certainly than there would have been if I

This week's share: Bok choy, Garlic scapes, Lettuce, Rhubarb, Scallions, Cilantro, Dill

had not grown the buckwheat there. This has made our lives and the vegetables' considerably easier. We have fewer tasks competing for our time and the vegetables have fewer weeds competing for nutrients and water.

While these crops do suppress the weeds, build organic matter, add nutrients and improve the soil's water holding capacity and tilth, they are not without their drawbacks. Rye and buckwheat set seed quite quickly and can become weed problems themselves. Sudan grass is so fibrous it can be hard to work into the soil. And sometimes it is hard to kill the vetch when you want to. Plus none of them taste good (not the plants, anyway; buckwheat, oats and millets are all grain crops), which is why, no matter how well they grow, I will try to keep them out of your bags—at least for the moment. If we get desperate and that buckwheat looks particularly lush you may find a few bunches of it.

Fortunately, we are not quite there yet. We found a few vegetables around the farm this week to dole out. None of them are the official New York State vegetable. A few weeks ago the state Senate passed a bill conferring that honor on sweet corn, undeterred by the objections of one of their colleagues, who pointed out fruitlessly that corn is not a vegetable. But why let pesky facts get in the way of pointless legislation? Well, at least our vegetables are vegetables—even rhubarb, of course. As long as it is a vegetative part of the plant—stem, leaf, root—it qualifies.

That does not mean you have to treat the rhubarb as you do most vegetables. Feel free to mix it with some berries and make a crisp or shortcake or ice cream or coffee cake. But you can also use it to make a savory sauce or chutney for grilled meats.

I suppose you could make a bok choy coffee cake too if you wanted (I would be interested to hear about it if you do). I would recommend, however, sticking to something a little more obvious, such as steaming the bok choy until tender and then stir frying it quickly and finishing it with soy sauce, sesame oil, hot pepper and vinegar.

Speaking of things in your bag, you may from time to time find vegetables (or fruits) not on the list. Sometimes we do not have enough of a crop for everyone. We keep track and spread things around so that over the course of the season everybody gets a fair share (if not an identical one).

And if you do find some buckwheat in your share you might try a few stems raw (they are probably crunchy, a little stringy and fairly bland, a bit like celery, which when you think about it is a somewhat unlikely food too). As for the rest of it, just sauté it with olive oil and garlic as you would anything else. Use a lot of garlic and it cannot be that bad. And if the idea of eating cover crops does not appeal to you, then I suggest that instead you just come out to the farm on July 8th and we will show you the cover crops and let you nibble on a few tastier things.

A note to people who pick up at Parker: the folks at Parker hate to see vegetables go to waste. Rather than throwing out any uncollected shares on Monday morning, they would prefer to take them home Friday afternoon. If you are in the habit of waiting to pick up your share there on Friday evening let me know and I will tell them to leave your bag alone. Or you can call Parker (286-3449) and let them know. Otherwise, they will find a good home for the vegetables (and cover crops).