

THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS – 29 June 2006

I know last week I promised to tell you the meaning of life, but before I get to that I should just say one or two things about kohlrabi.

Though not particularly sizeable (at least when they are picked at the right time), kohlrabi loom large in some peoples' minds. And I don't mean that kohlrabi carry great emotional significance for these people. They are not a metaphor for something profound. They cause no epiphanies. They have no totemic value (though they would make a spiffy element in a totem pole).

I mean rather that the kohlrabi literally loom large, like a hostile space craft hovering over your house. These people perceive kohlrabi as something roughly the size of a small car, the sort of thing you should not be expected to squeeze through your front door and find space for in the refrigerator. Certainly not something you should eat. These are the people who want to know why I grow kohlrabi.

I would have thought I grow a number of crops more questionable than kohlrabi. But I seem to hear more complaints about it than about any of my other crops. Any of the others that I continue to grow. Sometimes I do give up on a vegetable if it fails to generate any noticeable enthusiasm. I have not heard any laments for tomatillos these past two years.

But every year I plant kohlrabi again. Why oh why? Well, for a start they are pretty. And they taste good. And they have a pleasant texture. And they are simple to prepare (just peel them and cut them in thin slices). And some people actually like them. And they are easy to grow.

Of these reason, the last looms largest in my mind. I know this sounds cruelly selfish. But my job is to grow a large quantity of fresh produce in a way that leaves me a little time for sleep and maybe even a little profit at the end of the year. I can achieve this in large part by being efficient—by having the right equipment and doing tasks at the right time and thinking through jobs to find the easiest way to accomplish them.

Finding a machine to speed of jobs is easy. I could get a one row Pixall bean picker that would harvest all the beans we need for a week in about 10 minutes. Finding a machine you can justify buying is harder (or should be). This spring I got a plastic mulch layer this spring. While not perfect, it is relatively inexpensive and does the job faster than the last machine I used, something my neighbor found in a hedgerow somewhere in Schoharie County. In addition to the efficiency of the machine, the plastic mulch itself significantly reduces the time we spend weeding and increases the productivity of the crops planted in it (assuming they are above water).

Finding a better way to do a job is harder. You have, for a start, to admit that you may have been doing it all wrong for years. We have experimented the past few weeks with different ways of packing the bags to see if we can cut down on the time it takes (about two hours for three people) and on the chance we will mispack a bag, which takes time to correct. I still dream of a robotic CSA packing machine; we would dump vegetables in the top and it would do the rest. Until I find a cheap one, we can play around in the packing room and see what happens.

Coming attractions: rain, more rain, despair

This week's share: Arugula, Beets, Garlic scapes, Dandelion, Lettuce, Radishes, Scallions, Lemon basil, Purple basil, Marjoram

Getting the timing right is harder still. Organic farmers use a technique called stale seedbedding. We make as inviting an environment for weeds as possible so that they all germinate. Then we kill them with a shallow pass of the cultivator (we are a devious bunch) and plant our crop in the theoretically weed-free bed. To do it right you have to fit it into your planting schedule and take into account the habits of different weeds, which germinate at different times. And then you have to hope that the soil is workable when you need to work it, a factor you don't always have much say in. The past seven weeks or so, for instance, have not provided much opportunity for timely weed control.

Given the natural obstacles to efficiency in farming, we look for any help we can get. And one of the places we look is in seed catalogs. There we find varieties that will grow well in our climate and soil, produce abundantly, and withstand the major pest and diseases problems. In other words, we find the vegetables that are easy to grow.

Easy to grow is a relative concept. Take the lettuce in your bag for instance (which will make a nice salad with the arugula and some dandelion). We grow a lot of lettuce (we start between 600 and 1000 each week from early April through early September), but I don't spend a great deal of time worrying about it. We have a way to grow it that seems to work fairly reliably. All we have to do is plant the lettuce seeds in cell trays in the greenhouse, water them frequently for four weeks, plant them out in the high tunnel in well worked beds heavily enriched with compost, weed the beds a couple of times and run the irrigation frequently enough to keep the lettuce cool and growing consistently without getting the it so wet the bottom rots off. All of which would not do us much good if we chose varieties particularly susceptible to mildew or prone to bolting in the heat or too fragile to pack or incapable of making large heads. But we have found 16 or so varieties that work well in our system consistently.

Sometimes we try growing something in a new way and find it works better. We used to grow arugula (which makes a good salad with slices of beet and a little goat cheese) only in the fall, when the flea beetles went away and the cooler temperatures didn't tempt it to bolt. But we discovered last year that we could grow it successfully in the greenhouse throughout the year. Basil (the purple tastes like the normal Genovese basil; the lemon tastes like it smells and would be good chopped up and sprinkled on some grilled fish) turns out to like the greenhouse too, especially early in the season. Using a finer mulch (a mix of wood chips and hay) on the garlic made weeding much easier this year. Without much competition from weeds the garlic should size up, and harvesting it ought to be considerably less irritating. Certainly, the scapes are big and healthy (and particularly curly) and they taste good if you cut them in small pieces and sauté them (they turn soft and sweet, like faintly garlicky asparagus).

And sometimes we find a crop that seems to grow well every year without much help, such as kohlrabi. Like the lettuce, it starts in the greenhouse, but it cares less about soil quality or steady moisture or heat. Sometimes the leaves get ugly (you can eat them; they are like kale), but the bugs don't mess with the flesh. "Sensible bugs" I hear the kohlrabi haters murmuring, but I think those bugs are missing out on something good. Aside from just slicing it up and eating it, you can grate it into coleslaw, sauté it like a turnip, roast it, mash it.. And if you really cannot bring your to try it then consider its decorative purposes or feed it to a pig (14 and 15 like everything in the brassica family).

Now for the meaning of life. It turns out, surprisingly, to be... oops, I ran out of space.

**Fruit share: Strawberries from John Hand, Hand Melon Farm, Easton.
Coming soon: red currants, red and black raspberries.**