

THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS – 13 July 2006

This spring I decided I would no longer write about the weather in the newsletter. For a start, I have already written just about everything one can—or should—say on the topic, all of which boils down to this: if you don't like the weather now, wait a couple of days and it will be lousy in some completely different way. True, the particulars of the lousiness change from week to week and year to year, but after a while the details just blend together into one long, hopeless complaint. It gets tedious. Anyway, I am tired of talking about it, which suggests that many of you must be good and thoroughly sick of the whining too.

I don't mean to suggest that weather has ceased to play a central role in the life of the farm; sadly it has not. We continue to do the bulk of our work outside and our crops have yet to evolve a complete indifference to the nature of their surroundings. But the weather has ceased to play perhaps quite such an important part in my outlook. I remain pessimistic. I was born that way and I have encountered few things these past forty years to make me think of optimism as anything but a delusion. I guess I have just gotten used to the weather. I no longer yell at the sky. I have learned to shrug and get on with my work—or shrug and postpone my work, as the case may be. I can deal with most of the damage the weather inflicts, and if I cannot, well then I get the rest of the year off.

It struck me too that having ones work subject to the whims of the weather is hardly agriculture's special burden. True, day to day the weather matters less and less to most Americans. It can be an inconvenience—a driveway to shovel, a puddle in a parking lot, a trip to a ballgame postponed. But until it comes through the floodwalls, people don't take it too seriously. A nation of farmers would hardly be so shocked and appalled each time by the power of a storm. Nor, however, would a nation of fishermen, a nation of carnival operators, or a nation of ski mountain owners.

Complaining too much about the weather also suggests that we are largely powerless to do anything about it. We are powerless in a way, of course. We cannot change the weather—at least not on any given day (though you have the admire the effort we are going to to change the climate in general). But we can mitigate the weather's effects on our crops. If we couldn't you would have received fewer vegetables this year. The beets, lettuce, turnips, basil, arugula, dandelion, kohlrabi and Chinese cabbage all grew in our irrigated greenhouses. Given the choice, I would grow a lot more crops in greenhouses: beans, early carrots, onions, squash, cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers. Actually, it is not so much the choice I need to be given as it is the greenhouses. More specifically, 26 by 144 foot Rimol Northpoint series frames with roll up sides (preferably with the gear box) and reinforced poly curtains, wire lock fastening for sides and end bows and a single layer of 4 year 6 mil Tufflite infrared plastic. I could use about ten of them. Or, if it is easier, a retractable dome for the whole farm.

Given all that, not writing about the weather seemed an eminently sensible idea. The only thing I forgot to consider was how the weather would feel about being left out of the newsletter. Silly me. I guess I know now. I do not mean to suggest that I am entirely responsible for the remarkably unpleasant weather we have had the past nine weeks. No doubt other farmers did things to irritate it too. But I realize now that belittling the weather in this way was a dangerously foolish choice. Unfortunately, I have come to my senses

This week's share: Chinese cabbage, Green garlic, Kohlrabi, Lettuce, Pearl onions, Sugar snap peas, Peppers, Radicchio, Squash, Basil, Oregano

a little to late for some of our crops. The first two planting of broccoli, the second planting of spinach, the middles of the Brussels sprout and summer squash rows, the south end of the peas, three beds of snap beans and a portion of the of the tomato patch have all suffered serious harm. Our vegetable fields sit at the bottom of the hill and have poor drainage. Vegetables like to be able to breathe a little through their roots, which they cannot do in fully saturated soil. This is not good weather for us. We prefer a good drought.

We have done our best to shrug this off. We are keeping the greenhouses full (we often replant a bed the same day we take the previous crop out). We have replanted what we can (beans, spinach, broccoli). And we ought to have enough of the other crops to get by. It will, however, take some time to get things back in order (assuming the rain actually lets up a bit). In the meantime, we will not have as many crops—or as much of the crops we do have—as we should.

By that, of course, I mean as I think we should. I recognize, however, that my idea of an appropriate quantity of produce differs from many people's. As a farmer I want all my crops to thrive all the time and then I want to hand them out so people can enjoy them. Plus I tend to work up a serious appetite trying to make the crops thrive. It gives me an unusual idea of what a meal should look like. It is probably best that something rein in my natural inclination towards overabundance.

Something has reined in the squash's natural inclination towards overabundance, which may also be for the best. It has only just started to produce, and grudgingly. As always, I recommend slicing the squash, brushing it with olive oil and grilling it. You could grill the onions too. And the radicchio. It is not bad grilled, but I prefer it in a salad. I would guess you could also grill the Chinese cabbage (I once grilled some wedges of red cabbage) and make a grilled cabbage and radicchio slaw. But if you want to cook it I would suggest stir frying. Or you could just make raw slaw. You can make a mayonnaise with some of the green garlic and basil (you have Genovese, purple and lemon in the bunch), which will taste good with grilled squash (and for all I know with grilled Chinese cabbage too). Put the garlic (a clove or two) and basil leaves (I used Genovese and lemon basil) in a blender with some olive oil and whiz it smooth. Vigorously whisk together an egg yolk and a teaspoon of Dijon mustard and then dribble in the garlic/basil oil, continuing to whisk vigorously so that the mixture emulsifies (if it does not look like enough then add a bit more plain olive oil). Add salt to taste and perhaps a dash of vinegar or lemon juice. You could add a little oregano to the mayonnaise, but I think it might be a little harsh for that. Instead, use it, more of the garlic, lemon juice and a lot of salt and pepper to marinate a chicken, which you can grill alongside the squash and Chinese cabbage and serve with your lettuce and radicchio salad and some lightly steamed peas.

If that sounds like too much food then you can either skip a dish or two or come work on the farm to increase your appetite. If you prefer the latter solution you are in luck. We will have our first work day on Saturday, August 5th starting at 10 am. We will take on some satisfying and not unduly taxing job for two or three hours. You are welcome to stay after and have a picnic on the farm. We will provide drinks and cookies. If you cannot make it then you can try again on Sunday, September 17th, or wait until the fall open house on Sunday, October 1st. Or if you are truly desperate to eat justifiably like a farmer you can give me a call and set up some other time to come out and toil. Just let me know how hungry you want to be and I will find the right task for you.

Fruit share: black raspberries and blueberries from Ken Denberg, Natural Selection Farm, Cambridge, and white currants from The Alleged Farm.