

## THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS - 21 July 2005

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Some years ago my brothers went on a ski trip with a friend who drove them to Killington in his somewhat unreliable car. They made it all the way to the mountain, but the car had had enough after that long journey. After some searching they managed to find a laconic local mechanic who agreed unenthusiastically to take a look and let them know what he thought the car needed. Silently, he poked around in the engine for a while, took a look underneath, and finally stood back to ponder the whole vehicle. "Well, if it were my car," he finally drawled, "I'd light a fire under it and explode it."

I think of that every time I watch Jacob head out in our box truck on the delivery route, which ought to happen every Thursday around noon. It ought to, but sometimes, as was this case last week, it doesn't. The vegetables were ready and Jacob was ready, but the box truck was not. The previous week it had run perfectly well (by which I mean well enough). But when we needed it for the next delivery the engine would only sputter to life for a few seconds and then die out. Because it seemed like the things to do, we tilted the cab forward and peered at the motor. It was still there, which seemed like a good start. There were a bunch of hoses and wires and a few thingies and boxes and an odd doodad in the carburetor. We banged on a couple of these, wiggled a few of the others. However, given the fact that we had no idea what could have happened to an engine that was off and have barely any idea of what goes on in an engine that's on, our attempts to fix the truck were unsurprisingly fruitless. At least we didn't break anything.

Fortunately, Tom Skiff lives over the hill. Skiffs have been living on one or other of this hill for at least a couple of centuries. Long enough, anyway, that they are related to everyone else in Easton. At one point they had a cheese factory across the field from our farm and Tom's great grandfather had the store in South Easton. His father ran a store in Greenwich after he sold off his milk cows. Now he raises beef cows and takes his grandchildren for rides on one of his horse drawn carts.

And Tom fixes things. Box trucks, for instance. As soon as he glanced at the truck's engine he said, "oh, it's a 350 with a throttle body injector," which I guess is what some people call that doodad in the carburetor. As it turned out, the doodad was causing the problem by dumping fuel into the carburetor as though it were an afterburner on a fighter jet. Now there would be a way to get deliveries done quickly. Or to

light a fire under the truck and explode it. But Tom felt a repair was called for. He just wasn't sure which thingy had gone wrong, so he called Billy, who agreed it probably was one of the injector sensors. But it wasn't, so Billy called Frankie, and Frankie called Tom and assured him it had to be the map sensor—don't ask, I have no idea what it does—or the temperature sensor, which doesn't make sense even to Tom, but he pulled a wire out and the truck started.

It's nice to have a working truck again, but I do not trust it. Something will go wrong at some inconvenient moment. It is an excessively complex machine in which unrelated parts have unforeseen effects on one another. Come to think of it, the truck is a little like the weather. Though we rely on it, it is fundamentally unreliable in unpredictable ways. But the truck can be fixed—at least until Tom or Billy or Frankie tells us to blow it up.

As for the weather, sadly, there is nobody I know to call in to make it run better. It is possible, however, that we are well on our way towards lighting a fire under it and exploding it.

**This week's share: Arugula, Beans, Carrots, Chard, Lettuce, Hot pepper,  
Scallions, Squash,  
Lemon balm, Parsley**

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**This week's news:** The weather is starting to take a toll. Not so much on the vegetables, though we have lost a number of summer squash plants to some odd rot and some of the zucchini are getting moldy. And the flea beetles are prospering. And the weeds have flourished as I have never seen them flourish before (that's what I get for spreading lime and fertilizer like never before). And some of the lettuce is bolting at a tender age. And the weeds are out of control. And the seedlings in the greenhouse are being cooked. And—I don't know if I have mentioned this before—the weeds are phenomenally terrible. But I was not talking about the farms so much as the farmers. Farming in any weather is strenuous, and especially so in July when we have the most crops to tend. Nearly everything we will plant except the last successions of lettuce and a few beds of fall crops is in the ground and needs tending—weeding, cultivating, pruning, mulching, staking, hilling, spraying, picking. And the picking takes more and more of our time. Not only do we have more things to pick (though not as many as we would have hoped for now; those tomatoes and peppers were set back by the cold in May) but the crops either need to be picked more often (we try to go through the squash patch every two days) or take more time to pick (beans for 160 people keeps the whole farm crew busy for about half a day). Nor do we have any storage crops yet. By October we will have bins of potatoes, onions, garlic and winter squash in the barn simply waiting for sorting and weighing. But if we want to hand out potatoes now (they are just not quite big enough yet, but I think they may have sized up by next week) we have to go out to the potato field with pitch forks and dig them up. Those of you who came out to the farm last October will remember what that is like in a cold rain. Well, it is worse on a tropical day. We spent Monday morning putting hay mulch around the tardy peppers (if we put it on thick enough it should squelch the weeds, it keeps moisture in the soil, and it improves the soil as it breaks down). Our latest teenage worker spent about half the time sitting on a bale of hay looking stunned—by the heat and by the unpleasant realization that working for money, which had sounded so magical, actually involves working. Life, I am afraid I and the heat and the hay had forced him to recognize, is not such a great bargain after all. Or maybe he was just hot. The rest of us are in farming shape and somewhat inured to the steaminess and perhaps a bit more used to the idea of labor so we didn't sit on the hay. But we have all slowed down. It is a matter of survival. If we tried working at September speed now we would never make it to September. We probably wouldn't even make it to lunch time.

Well, that little promo will certainly get you all excited about that work day on the 30<sup>th</sup>. Perhaps, though, the 30<sup>th</sup> will be a lovely day for a little farm work. Please let me know if you are feeling optimistic and energetic and are planning to come to the farm that day. Not only can I

**Fruit share: Raspberries grown by Ken Denberg, Natural Selection Farm, Cambridge, NY and black currants grown on The Alleged Farm.**