

## THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS – 27 July 2006

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I cannot help noticing that most of my weeding implements work best in the absence of weeds.

To be fair, the best time to kill weeds is when you cannot see them. And no, I am not suggesting that the savvy farmer works most efficiently blindfolded, though there are times when I look at the fields and I think I would be better off just closing my eyes. I mean that it is a lot easier to kill a weed when it has only just germinated, before it has emerged from the soil (known as the white thread stage because it has a single strand of root). Unlike some plant life—cucumbers vines and spinach spring to mind, but really one could insert the name of just about any vegetable crop here—weeds are tenacious. Once they have started to grow they do not want to stop. You can mow weeds, burn them, cut them down to the ground, even pull them out roots and all, and often as not they will find a way to keep growing. If you can get to them at the white thread stage you have a much better chance of killing them the first time.

It's getting to them, all of them, and nothing but them at that stage that is the hard part. There might be crops in the way. The soil might be too wet to work. The machinery might not be working. The farmer might not be working. The moment passes—and it passes quickly. Weeds, especially at this time of year, go from white thread stage to dense jungle undergrowth stage in a matter of days. That is, unless they encounter good growing conditions.

I have a tool for killing weeds you cannot see. Called a flex tine weeder, it looks like something a blue whale would use to scratch his back. The long spring steel tines wiggle through the top half inch of dirt as you (you on the tractor, that is) pull it along, dislodging the newly sprouted weeds. But plants more deeply rooted, including crops, are left more or less alone. Under the right circumstances I can drag it over a bed of young beans or a row of newly emerged potatoes and leave in my trail neatly weeded crops. Of course, any weeds reasonably well rooted are left too. And it only works truly effectively in dry soil on a hot, sunny, windy day when the heat and light and air combine to quickly kill any tender plant it uproots. I have not hooked it to the tractor since early May.

Not that, even in the driest of years, I have ever come close to killing all the weeds with the flex tine weeder. That is why I have an array of other weeding implements designed to kill bigger, stronger weeds. I have a Buddingh basket weeder, which looks like something a blue whale might use to whip cream to go with his three berry pie, that works on newly emerged weeds and can be used, if you are paying close attention and never do anything like sneeze or blink, to weed within about a quarter of an inch of a row of vegetables. I have Bezzerides Spyders, which look like a cowboy blue whale's spurs, that mangle weeds in their path and can also be set to throw a little dirt into the vegetable rows to bury weeds there (and the vegetables if they are not tall enough or you go too fast). I have S-tines with four inch sweeps, hardened steel triangles with swept back wings like a stealth fighter, that simply rip through the soil. I have spring shanks with big, heavy duty sweeps, that will cultivate compacted tire tracks and have proved surprisingly effective as potato diggers. I have a Perfecta, which combines sweeps, tines and something like a basket weeder and looks like nothing a blue whale would find any use for. It clears out a whole bed at a time to prepare it for seeding or clean it up when a crop is finished.

You might think that with all those tools I could have the whole farm well weeded with a few relaxing passes of the tractor every week. You would be especially susceptible to that notion if you spent some time browsing through my equipment catalogs, which make for lovely winter reading (for a vegetable farmer anyway) and are about as closely related to reality as a White House economic analysis. I do not regret buying any of these tools. They all have their uses (for me at least, if not always for blue whales). But it is impossible to ignore the extent to which weeds curtail their effectiveness.

Coming attractions: toil on the farm for no pay on Saturday, August 5<sup>th</sup>

## **This week's share: Bok choy, Carrots, Cucumber, Garlic, Lettuce, Peppers, Hot peppers, Potatoes, Squash, Tomatoes, Lemon balm, Purple Basil**

The basket weeder works best in loose soil and only kills the tenderest young shoots. If there are too many weeds it has a hard time getting through them to stir up the soil. The Spyders are more aggressive, but weedy soil gums up the points and tough weed stems wrap around the shaft and lock it up. The sweeps, with enough tractor power, will cut through dense weeds, but rather than killing them they tend simply to move them sideways. The Perfecta is less forgiving to anything in its path, but it has an odd habit in weedy beds of picking up small weeds, moving them ten or fifteen feet and replanting them. While such a ride can prove shocking to weeds, even to crab grass or nutsedge, it takes more of a fright than that to scare them away.

I cannot say that any of this surprises me. Well, I can. I can also say that we are bringing peace and democracy to the Middle East and that the estate tax is a threat to family farms. I think, however, I will stick to the truth for the moment and point out that few tools (my Kitchenaid mixer) are as good as advertised. The artificial heart is great as long as you are not planning on using it for too long. The space shuttle is an engineering marvel except when it isn't. I really like my tractor but I have had to take it to Tom Skiff twice this year for repairs. So there's no reason to expect that weeding implements will handle weeding flawlessly. And anyway, if they did there would not be enough work for Andrea and Greg and Kari, who are the farm's most formidable weeding implements and do, I must admit, work agreeably in the presence of lots of weeds, though I hear occasional complaints about having to pull up thistles. Well, there is the three of them and there's my moldboard plow, the last line of defense against weeds. Sometimes, when the tools have failed, it's not worth hand weeding a crop. So I plow it under and then I cannot see the weeds anymore, which as you may recall is the best time to kill them.

Fortunately, I have not had to resort to the plows much so far this year, which, I hasten to point out, is more of a testament to plastic mulch than it is to my farming skill. But I might have to threaten a number of crops with the plow. I number of them are still sulking about the rain. Distressingly, the tomatoes are on this list. The plants are stunted and sickly pale and they are not producing a lot of fruit. I have some hope for the later planting, but I am afraid this will not be a great tomato year.

Andrea is not distressed. She prefers potatoes, which are doing fine, and she promises to come up with a good argument for this odd opinion, something so powerful that you will all come to see how lucky you are not to be afflicted with too many tomatoes. I am still waiting.

In the meantime, here are some carrots to take your mind off the tomatoes (and a few tomatoes to distract you from the carrots). If that does not work, perhaps a nice big bok choy will, particularly if you steam it until the stems are just tender and douse it in a garlic-soy sauce-sesame oil-hot pepper sauce. And if that fails just eat the hot peppers, which, depending on the pepper, might distract you from just about everything else. I might have to try it myself when the farm gets too weedy.

**Fruit share: Thanks to the vagaries of the weather and of Ken, the fruit farmer, the fruit shares do not all contain the same thing. But they all have at least one kind of Ken's berries, and some of them have berries from The Alleged Farm too.**

**Ken promises he will have more berries next week, but I hesitate to predict which ones he will pick for me.**