

## THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS – 6 July 2006

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The tiny toads have come back to the farm.

Putting it like that suggests they have been just returned home from somewhere else, some winter getaway. Just imagine how bad the summer weather must be there to make them come back here now. In other words, they must have been in Florida. I can almost picture planeloads of them hopping irritably through airport security, croaking plaintively about the size of the in-flight snack—“they expect us to survive four hours on a tiny bag of flea beetle legs?”—and huddled around the baggage carousels waiting without any expectation of success for their suitcases to appear.

Well, the toads must go somewhere for the winter. I know I don't see them around much after October and I doubt they are crawling around under the snow in January. They do not look like they would handle the cold well. They don't appear to have a lot of body fat. They don't have a lot of body. I'd be surprised if they are longer than half an inch fully extended and they have a physique slender enough to make a fashion model envious. Tiny toad versus ladybug would be a more or less fair fight—and I think I might put my money on the bug. In fact, they are so astoundingly tiny I cannot imagine what they live on. No doubt they would love to dine on a cabbage moth, but they would have to gang tackle it and I have never seen any evidence of these Lilliputians hunting in packs.

Not that we have any shortage of tiny toads, and I have to imagine that this will be a particularly good year for them. At least, it seems like toad weather, though for all I know they prefer a good drought. What I do know is that year after year they appear in my fields around this time and that I never see them doing anything but trying to get out of my way. It is true that they are much easier to spot when they move. No doubt I pass right by many tiny toads engaged in more sedentary activities than fleeing. But I spend many hours close to the ground and you would think that after twelve years alongside them I might have seen one of these toads hunting or eating or solving a crossword puzzle or whatever it is they do when left to their own devices.

Perhaps tiny toads observe the Sabbath every day and only dine after the sun goes down. If I went out late with a lantern I would discover them noshing on ritually slaughtered beetles. Perhaps they have a whole subterranean existence. If I knew where to dig I would find vast underground cities full of tiny toads in minivans on their way to tanning salons and fitness centers. Perhaps tiny toads don't do anything but hop out of the way of larger creatures. That would explain how they maintain their petite figures. I should market the Tiny Toad Constant Avoidance Fitness System: “ten hours a day of jumping out of the way of large objects helped me lose 100 pounds in only three weeks.” Perhaps tiny toads are not toads at all. Some insidious pest has created an ingenious disguise allowing it to move unharassed amongst my vegetables. One of these days, thanks to intelligence gathered through the indiscriminate use of wire taps, I will surprise a squad of these scheming bugs zipping themselves into their toad costumes. And then it's off to indefinite detention for them.

It's embarrassing, really, how little I know about my amphibian compatriots. Not that farmers need to master herpetology and there's no question of reciprocity. Though I like to imagine that the tiny toads appreciate my decision to forgo the standard battery of

## **This week's share: Garlic scapes, Kohlrabi, Lettuce, Sugar snap peas, Peppers, Scallions, Hakurei turnips, Dill, Savory**

agricultural chemicals—chemicals that cause significant harm to frogs and toads—I recognize that to them I am just Big Foot.

Still, I feel I have some obligation to know more about the creatures I spend my days with. We share this farm. I would like to be able to identify more of the birds. Not just the obvious ones, the killdeer, the blue herons, the red tailed hawks, the goldfinches, but all the little song birds whose nests we find tucked into rhubarb plants and berry bushes. I want to know where the snapping turtle we see each April lumbering towards our pond spends the rest of the year. I want to know how the coyotes yipping all night on the hill behind DJ's house spend their days. And I want to know how a toad no bigger than a pebble in your shoe and as delicate as a scrap of burnt paper lives and thrives in my vegetable fields.

Obviously, I do not feel the obligation strongly enough to have actually done anything about it. I am happy to see the tiny toads, happy to stop whatever I am doing and shoo them out of my way, happy that I am not poisoning them. I consider them a good omen. But I don't know their proper name, their mating habits, their dining habits, their shopping habits, their hobbies or even if they prefer paper or plastic.

Maybe some day I will learn all about tiny toads. It can wait. Unless they really are pests in disguise, tiny toads pose no obvious threat to my crops. Plenty (in fact, more than plenty) of other creatures do and they are the ones that get my attention. Things like Colorado potato beetles, who don't show any fondness for paper or plastic but love to eat potato and eggplant plants. Or striped cucumber beetles, who mate all too often and spread diseases as they nibble on the cucumber, squash and melon leaves. Or deer, who have shown an unfortunate willingness this year to expand their palates. In addition to the usuals, the beets and chard and celery root, they have been grazing on beans and spinach and dill and peas, which they eat right off the trellised vines. They probably think we grow them that way for their benefit because we are a bunch of soft hearted deer lovers. Some day soon they will discover how wrong they are, and I am not talking about indefinite detention.

At least they were kind enough to leave a few peas for the rest of us, which obviously can be eaten raw but taste better steamed for a couple of (and only a couple of) minutes. And they have so far ignored the peppers entirely, which is good because the peppers are having a tough enough year as it is. Naturally, they have nothing to do with kohlrabi. As for garlic, well the clearest indication that deer are just a bunch of dumb beasts is that they never eat garlic. Not even scapes, which grow at the perfect height for easy grazing. Perhaps they would if they could figure out how to wield a skillet and spatula with their hooves. But it's too late this year. We picked all the scapes this week so that the bulbs can size up.

**Fruit share:** No fruit this week. The berries are slow to ripen, but Ken at Natural Selection Farm (its on Darwin Road) hopes to be picking red and black raspberries and blue berries next week, and we will have currants in three colors.