

## THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS - 7 July 2005

People think plants are sedentary. Sure, they grow up and out, but they don't appear to move around. People would be far less likely to plant memorial trees if they thought the trees might uproot themselves and wander away down the road after a few years. You dig a hole in the ground and put a plant in it and it stays there. Quite likely, it dies soon after you put it in, but still it stays there.

I wish that were true. Well, the part about them dying is accurate. But the plants that survive don't always stay put. They can move. Not, it is true, as we do. I do not intend to convince you that plants actually stand up and walk around (though if I could it would make writing the newsletter a great deal easier as there would be almost nothing I could not suggest). So plants don't have legs. But they don't need them. They can march across a field as impressively as any human army (and occupy the conquered land in an overwhelming fashion human armies, it would seem, cannot begin to match).

If you think I have just been out in the sun too long I suggest you come and look at the bottom half acre of our tomato field. It is lovely soil, dark and rich and as close to rock free as anything on the farm (which is not all that close). It is far better soil that you will find at the top of the field—in part because all the good soil has been washed off the top down to that bottom piece. And yet you will also find that while we have planted an acre of crops up top amongst the rocks, we have not planted any on the good piece below. We cannot. The grass has taken it over.

There were a few small patches of grass, some burdock and the odd milkweed in the field when I first started to use it five years ago. But the field had been in corn for years and so had received an annual dose of potent herbicide. It was mostly just a rain washed expanse of corn stubble and gravel. I had our neighbor plow and disk the field and let it sit fallow for the first year. It stayed remarkably weed free (good old residual herbicide). The next year, in preparation for planting vegetables the third year, we fall plowed the top half of the field. It was all the ground we thought we would need and it has a good southern slope that we hoped would warm it up early in the season.

The grass, which had been lurking along the hedgerow, saw that we had left the lower portion untended and began surreptitiously to move in. I noted that the patches of grass were getting bigger. A few stray wisps became clumps and clumps became swaths. But I didn't have time to deal with them. For most of the year, it is as much as we can do to weed the spots where we have planted crops. And so the grass spread, and by that fall the wisps had become a field lush enough that our neighbor asked if he could hay it. I should have let him and left it at that because when I tried to plow the grass under I found it had in six months formed a mat of roots so dense I could barely pull a plow through it. And when I had, creating an awful, half turned, clumpy mess, the grass simply grew back any which way.

I would like to report that nothing else spreads like grass. But I have watched Canadian thistles and nutsedge and purslane and chickweed and pigweed and lamb's quarters and crab grass race across fields at astounding

rates. By root and rhizome and seed, they reach out for any unoccupied ground, rushing to set down roots and send up leaves before another plant can grab the nutrients and blot out the sunlight.

Unfortunately, farming involves creating as close to the perfect conditions for plant growth as possible. And though we try to force the weeds as far from our fields as possible, they cannot help but notice what we have done and try by any means they know to get back. It may sound funny to people who don't farm when I say that I feel besieged by weeds. How can something rooted by nature to one spot threaten to crash through my defenses? But plants have their ways.

At least, weeds do. I am unaware of any vegetable crops that will, like thistles, simply grow a new plant from each piece of root after you have tilled them under, thus prospering from what ought to have annihilated them. Or will, like purslane, flower and set seed after you have pulled their roots out of the soil and left them to die in the sun. The only crop that has ever shown an inclination to spread like a weed in my fields is

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**This week's share: Beets, Broccoli, Dandelion, Garlic scapes, Lettuce, Mustard greens, Snap peas, Scallions, Summer squash, Basil, Savory**

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**This week's news:** No doubt somewhere someone actually enjoys growing broccoli. Maybe even organic broccoli. And just possibly spring planted organic broccoli. But, to quote Bob Dylan (who else would one quote when talking about broccoli?), it ain't me, babe. It is not just that broccoli requires a lot of nutrients and space and proves attractive to flea beetles and caterpillars, though that might be enough to turn me against it. The real problem is that broccoli is unpredictable, and especially so early in the season. Sometimes it likes the cool weather, and sometimes it gets too cold and does odd things. Last year, our second planting of broccoli got thrashed by hail and produced some lovely heads, while the first and third plantings produced almost nothing. This year, our first crop, which had appeared to be sulking in the cold, formed decent heads early. A week early, to be precise. It had all bolted by the time we started deliveries. The second planting looked excellent. The plants had good color and size and hardly any flea beetle damage. And then they made these odd heads of broccoli—or not heads of broccoli, I suppose I should say. They taste fine, but I wish they looked like broccoli. Just close your eyes when you eat them, which you should do soon because broccoli does not keep well.

Beets, on the other hand, will last for weeks in the refrigerator if you take the tops off. I understand that some people feel they are best left there. This, however, would be a mistake. Real beets—good varieties fresh out of the ground—bear little resemblance to the things called beets that most people have encountered, those unpleasantly sweet, mushy disks at salad bars. Those, I believe, are actually a byproduct of paper manufacturing and are intended not so much for eating as for capping landfills. Real beets are easy to cook (you can boil them or wrap them in foil and bake them or roast them) and taste like dirt would if dirt tasted good (it doesn't). I, as I believe I already said, like beets best cold in a salad (you can also dice them finely and add them to a lettuce salad). The savory would go well in a beet salad dressing. But they are also excellent pureed. Just boil them longer, peel them, and whiz them around in a machine (any old machine) with some butter and enough liquid (cream or chicken stock or white wine or all three) to get a good smooth consistency. You can add coriander (ground coriander seed) or a little paprika. If you want a particularly light puree, beat in an egg or two and bake the puree for an hour or so. And if you are wondering why I am talking about beets when you just have a bunch of large white roots in your bag (as some of you do), well, those are white beets.

Garlic scapes will also last in the refrigerator for some time. But a better way to deal with excess scape capacity is to puree them with olive oil and a pinch of salt and freeze the puree in an ice tray. You can keep your scape pesto cubes in a bag in the freezer for months and take out as many as you need to swirl into a sauce or soup or put in a glass of iced tea if you feel like it.

If you find you have herbs left, you can just hang them in a cool dry place out of direct sunlight (and out of the kitchen, which tends to be fairly moist) and let them dry or you can chop them finely and work them into