

## THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS - 11 August 2005

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The best implement I have purchased for the farm in recent times is a two gallon insulated cooler with a tap. It's sturdy. It has a solid handle. It's not unattractive. The tap does not drip. Best of all, it kept the crew in drinks all Tuesday, brutally unpleasant as it was. And though the cooler sat on the back of the truck for nine hours, the little bit of water remaining in it at the end of the day was still appreciably cold.

No doubt I would be less excited about our new cooler on a chilly day in a chilly summer—on a day when I felt a less urgent need for a drink. No doubt, too, it was hard to appreciate anything but ice cold liquid this past Tuesday. But that does not change the fact that the cooler did precisely what I hoped, and what it claimed, it would do. I did not get it for cold weather. I got it to keep us from passing out on extremely hot days.

It is too soon, of course, to tell if the cooler is truly well made. It appears to be, but I won't know for sure for a decade or so. I liked my kitchen mixer right out of the box too, but I like it more now fourteen faultless years and several thousand batches of dough later. So I will deem the cooler satisfactory if it is still dispensing cold water to my farm crew in ten years, still not dripping, its handle intact—assuming nobody has run it over. Though I must say running something over is a surprisingly effective way to assess its quality. I once ran over my best pitchfork with a moldboard plow and even with a broken handle it is far better than any pitchfork I have bought since.

In fact, all the pitchforks I have bought since are junk. Most of them literally so. They have come and gone, their cheaply forged tines bent on rocks, their weak handles snapped in hard soil. Most mysteriously and annoyingly, many of them have heads that are so poorly attached to the handles that they simply drop off after a few days use. I understand that it is not so easy to figure out how to fix the metal head firmly to the wood handle. But the people who made my good pitchfork came up with a solution that can withstand a three-bottom plow. So it can be done. And it has to be done if the pitchfork is to be of any sustained use. The real problem, I suspect, is that it can not be done cheaply. Or cheaply enough, in any event, to guarantee the manufacturers of shoddy garden tools a significant profit.

But what is the point of making a pitchfork that does not work? The first one may be cheaper, but if you have to replace it once a week or so you would quickly be better off saving up for a good English fork that will last for years. Or getting together with some friends and pooling your money to get one to share—if you can find a place to buy a good garden tool.

These days most shops seem to be filled with badly made things. And not just cheap objects like pitchforks. Several months ago Sam and I went to the new Tractor Supply Store to look for, well, tractor supplies. I don't know why I thought a shop in a mall in Saratoga would actually have farm supplies, but I was rapidly disabused of that romantic notion. While we could not find a single cultivator part, there were plenty of things to put on your pickup, a wide array of substandard riding lawn mowers, and a

rack of cheap plastic versions of the lovely die-cast metal tractor and implement models that Sam loved when he was three. Sam's extensive collection is pretty much intact (it would take a committed brat with a framing hammer to do much damage to them), but these crudely detailed plastic toys looked like they might not survive the drive home.

One of the pleasures of farming is that much of the equipment is sensibly designed and solidly built. Take that three-bottom plow with which I attacked my pitchfork for instance. It started, probably thirty or forty years ago, as a five-bottom plow. It took Tom Skiff a couple of hours with a cutting torch and a torque wrench to make it suit my needs and tractor. The parts that wear down regularly in the soil are designed to be easily replaced, the parts that can wear down—wheels and hydraulic hoses—are not much harder to fix and the rest of it is made of steel thick enough to take a rocket propelled grenade. If only they built Humvees that well. I suspect my plows, with a little maintenance, will last me the rest of my farming life, and then they will serve someone else. The same probably goes for my good pitchfork. And maybe that cooler too.

**This week's share: Beets, Cucumbers, Eggplant, Kale, Onions, Pepper, Hot peppers, Potatoes, Squash, Tomatoes, Purple basil, Thyme, Corn from Hand Melon Farm**

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**This week's news:** We hosted a chicken slaughter at the farm this week. Hosted, anyway, in the sense that we provided the site and the chickens. Otherwise, we did not have to do a thing. In fact, we did not even get out of bed for the event. And we are still not sure who the guest was. All we know for sure is that it has rather crude table manners and a preference for white meat. Most likely, it was a dog. That or a particularly hungry weasel. Or a particularly large weasel. We are not going to have to worry about having too many eggs now.

The damage to our endive beds has been less gruesome. Lettuce does not bleed. But it has been more severe. We have some chickens left. The deer, however, have eaten every single head of endive we had in the field. Now, I don't expect any of you will shed too many tears over this. It's just endive. But we experienced some distress. It is a lot of effort to go to just to feed some deer and decent greens are hard to come by in the middle of the summer (especially in the middle of this summer)—and there were some really good looking heads of radicchio. Upon seeing what the deer had done I felt a sudden desire to take up deer hunting—out of season. Perhaps I should just convince our chicken killer to develop of a taste for venison. I would have to think that once a weasel had eaten a deer it would not have any room for even one chicken.

Unfortunately, the deer have developed a taste for more than endive. In fact, they seem to be willing to take a bite out of almost any vegetable plant. They have eaten a fair number of heads of lettuce, a significant portion of a bed of beets, a few carrot tops, some celery. Recently they mowed the top off the second planting of beans. According to the Department of Environmental Conservation, local deer populations have decreased significantly in the past couple of year. If so, the ones that remain are remarkably fond of vegetables. Whatever the case, The Department of Vegetable Conservation thinks the herd could get a lot smaller still.

Deer damage has been notably bad this year, but it will seem insignificant if we don't get some rain soon. We have had what appears to be a reasonable amount of rain for the past couple of months. Indeed, many crops—not just the weeds—have prospered. We spent much of the past week bringing in the onions, shallots and garlic (they are drying in the barn now) and they look quite good. But the year started dry. I was able to plow all our fields by the middle of April and we had to run the irrigation frequently in May. This has meant that we have lived from rain fall to rain fall. As long as we get rain frequently enough we are okay, but there is no moisture reserve in the ground. If we go for more than about a week between storms the crops start to suffer, especially when it is this hot and sunny (not only does the ground dry out, but the plants lose a lot of water through their leaves in these conditions). It is also awfully hard to get any new seedings to germinate when you are planting in dust.

Obviously, the crops are not suffering so much that we could find

**Fruit share: no fruit this week**