



THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS

16 August 2007

Last Saturday I opened up a tub of round, pale purple eggplants in the cooler. It reminded me that for most of the year I think of vegetables as chores.

I don't mean that I gain no pleasure from the crops we grow. I like to see a well-germinated bed of carrots. I enjoy looking down a row of trellised tomato plants. I can appreciate a nicely weeded bed of shell beans as much as anybody (especially one weeded by members). I can even stop in the middle of harvesting ten tubs of cucumbers to admire a particularly handsome example (of cucumber, not tub—though I like a good tub too).

For the most part, however, that pleasure has more to do with my being able to check off some task than with anything about the vegetables themselves. When I stare down the carrot bed and see those three rows showing clearly against the soil I think less about the carrots, lovely as the tiny frilly plants might be, than about having gotten in another succession at a good moment. And then my thoughts turn to how much weeding the bed will require. With the carrots up, it is too late to flame weed but we will need to go over the bed with the basket weeder as soon as possible and then again a few days later to catch some of the slower germinating weeds, followed about a week later, when the carrots are tall enough, by the sweeps and, if we are lucky, only minimal hand weeding. Unless, it rains a lot and we cannot use the basket weeder while the weeds are still small enough, in which case we will have to get out there on our hands and knees and do it all manually because carrots really do not like any competition.

When I have run through the possible weeding schedules, I start to try to calculate how long the carrots will take to grow. They will get off to a fast start at this time of year with the soil temperature up, but the nights are already starting to get cold and by late September growth will have started to slow down considerably so maybe we need to put on a row cover to get the plants as big as possible by then. On the other hand, we do not want them to size up too fast or they will catch up with the previous sowing. These are supposed to be our last carrots, for storage

While I am at it I can wonder just what kind of yield we will get when we dig them and worry about how cold it will be when we have to run them through the barrel washer—we may have to start draining the water lines at night so they do not freeze and burst—and think about whether we will want to put them into storage unwashed and only wash them as we need them or wash the whole lot when we pick them. And try to remember to call Community Action if we have a lot left over after the season, in which case I will have to put a heater in the storeroom because you do not want the storage crops to freeze. And think about what other crops we will have in what quantities at the end of the season so I can try to work out a rough distribution schedule.

If my thoughts are somewhat different when I look down that row of tomatoes it is only because the tomatoes require different tasks. Instead of contemplating row covers and late fall washing schedules I am thinking about how often we need to apply fungicide, whether or not we should add another string to the trellis, and if picking twice a week will suffice in the heart of the season. And so it goes with every crop. Even when we have picked everything for the share and tubs full of cleaned and sorted crops sit stacked in the cooler and the trays of tomatoes line the tables, I do not stop long to admire what we have grown. We have to pack it all, make sure each bag gets filled properly and put in the right pile and packed on the truck in the right order and delivered.

I do not say this to elicit your sympathy. Looking after the crops is my job and I chose this job (not that I can think of a lot of other jobs I could be doing). Sometimes I even enjoy it. Getting to the end of a bed and looking back down the weeded rows at the healthy crops can make even a pessimist like me feel a tiny surge of satisfaction.

This week's share: Beans, Broccoli, Cabbage, Carrots, Cucumbers, Eggplant, Red onion, Peppers, Hot pepper, Squash, Tomatoes, Basil

It just seems a shame sometimes that this job causes me to have so much trouble doing what got me into this business in the first place: looking at a pile of fresh produce and thinking “well those look awfully tasty, I would like to cook them for someone.” I bring in a bag of beans from the barn and cook them for dinner (boiling them in a little heavily salted water—do not stint on the salt—for about two minutes, just long enough to make them turn dark green and go slightly tender but in no way mushy) and I can tell they taste better than any bean I have ever bought in a grocery store and I like eating them, but I cannot stop thinking about what it was like to pick them, which makes me think about all the beans I have picked these past fourteen years and about the four plantings of beans we have yet to start picking this season. And none of that exactly makes me enjoy the beans on my plate less—it certainly makes me value them more—but it does rather get in the way of my simply delighting in the experience of eating good beans.

Last Saturday, however, I went out to the barn to see what Ryan and Marie had brought back from market, hoping both that they had sold everything and that I would find something good for dinner, and in the cooler I took the lid off a tub and found a pile of pale purple eggplants. And for some reason—maybe because the weather was so lovely and I had spent the past hour sitting under a maple tree reading, maybe because I was getting hungry, maybe because a crew of you had so good naturedly pitched in earlier that day to help weed the shell beans—as I hefted the shiny, firm and surprisingly heavy fruit I gave no thought to flea beetle control or what the cold nights would do to the crop or which varieties we would pick for this week's share. I just stood there and admired this remarkable thing I had grown and contemplated how well, sliced and grilled, it would go with a garlicky yogurt sauce. Which I turned out to be correct about.

Do not worry. I have not gone completely gaga just because I took a nice eggplant out of a box. The feeling passed soon enough. Despite the excellent yield and quality, I am already worrying about the effect of these cold nights on the eggplants and wondering if we should put a row cover over them or just try to get the flea beetle population down to keep the plants healthy. But, however brief, my experience with the eggplant did serve to remind me of how I hope you feel sometimes when you take the vegetables out of the bag.

Obviously (at least I hope it is obvious), part of the fun of belonging to a CSA is learning about—and sometimes even participating in—the work that goes into growing the food you eat. Produce does not just appear magically in stores and restaurants. It came from somewhere, somehow, some time, and knowing at least some of that matters because you eat it and because you have to live with the consequences of that where, how and when. Belonging to a CSA cuts through the often deliberate obfuscations and makes figuring that out straightforward and possibly even rewarding.

But the real reward comes, I hope, when you unpack your share and find something—an eggplant, a bag of beans, some carrots, a bunch of basil, maybe even yet another cucumber—that causes you to stop a moment and admire it and think that, yes, I am going to enjoy eating this fresh vegetable. And if you want to pause for a moment after you have finished your meal and think about us out there in the field growing your food, that would be nice, but I hope we do not disturb you as we work our way through our list of chores.