



THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS

2 August 2007

For ten years I have run the CSA according to one simple rule: never hand out cabbage two weeks in a row.

I know. That is not the sort of highfalutin dictum you were probably hoping I would offer up as the guiding principal of this CSA. It fails to convey the profound sense of social and ecological responsibility one might hope for from an organic vegetable farmer. Indeed, there's no real heft to it at all. Unlike, for instance, a constitutional amendment, it fails in its simplicity to suggest, well, much of anything. There's no obvious room for interpretation or debate, no metaphorical depth, not even a cheap pop cultural reference or sly pun.

But then, as some of you may have noticed, I am not much given to uplifting assertions of philosophical or moral purpose. I could not possibly, for instance, write that an unwavering respect for all nature's creations guides everything I do without feeling slightly queasy and rushing to point out that when I say all nature's creations I do not, of course, include Canadian thistles or flea beetles. Or deer. Or purslane. Or hail. Or crabgrass. Or striped cucumber beetles. Or anthracnose. Or voles. Or galinsoga. Or fusarium. Or... well, you get the idea.

And what does respect mean? I'll be polite to the weeds as I rip them out by the roots? I'll offer a little prayer of thanks to the tomato vines as I pick their fruit and spirit it away to be eaten?

While we are at it, what does "nature's creations" mean? Little, tomato-like berries grow in the wilds, but it took a bunch of dedicated plant breeders to come up with the varieties we plant. Then we set them out in neat rows in plastic mulch and trellis them on metal poles. Hardly what most people would consider natural (and maybe not even respectful) even if we do forego petrochemical fertilizers and the best pesticides modern agricultural science can create.

While my rule lacks a certain gravity, it is admirable in its own way for its clarity. When I say I won't hand out cabbage two weeks in a row you know what I mean—assuming you are not discussing it with a lawyer. I have no doubt a lawyer could quibble over the meaning of "hand out". Come to think of it, a lawyer could probably quibble over the meaning of "two".

If I am going to present a simplistic rule like this, the least I could do is offer up a good story about how I came up with it. Unfortunately, I do not really remember. I feel pretty certain that someone—maybe my sister-in-law—told me years ago about belonging to an unsatisfactory CSA that included a cabbage in the share every week. Apparently the story—if, in fact, I ever heard such a story—made an impression on me and I vowed never to make the mistake of giving my members too much cabbage. And so I have followed my cabbage rule for a decade now. Whether or not this has done me any good I don't know. But at least I have been consistent.

To be honest, for much of this time I could not have handed out consecutive cabbages even if I had had no rule prohibiting such behavior. Until the past couple of years

This week's share: Cabbage, Cucumber, Eggplant, Escarole, Leeks, Lettuce, Snap peas, Peppers, Hot pepper, Squash, Basil, Cilantro

I have not had much luck growing cabbage consistently. Or at all, sometimes. Five years ago we put in 3,000 cabbage seedlings and picked about 500 cabbages—and a good number of those were so small that instead of handing them out we played softball with them on the front lawn.

This year won't go down in the cabbage annals as a particularly great one. The first two plantings started out well enough, but took much longer than usual to start heading up (a number of crops are slow this year). We should have been picking them in early July, but there were not any large enough to harvest until last week, and even then they were somewhat smaller than I would like. In the meantime, however, the second planting was thriving two beds away under a row cover. In fact, we could have picked it last week too. Come to think of it, my rule says nothing about handing out two cabbages in one week so I suppose we could have. It seemed to make more sense, though, to wait until this week to hand them out.

Yes, I know. Handing them out this week breaks the rule. But they were not going to be in nearly as good shape by next week (cabbage is not nearly as durable in the field as one might imagine). I did not want a whole planting of good looking cabbage to go to waste to satisfy some silly rule. And anyway, there's nothing wrong with getting cabbage two weeks in a row. We hand out a lot of other crops—lettuce, squash, garlic, potatoes, tomatoes, basil—week after week and it does not seem to cause a lot of problems. I am not suggesting we should give you cabbage as often as garlic (which we just harvested and hung to dry in the barn). But you can make enough different dishes with cabbage that it could take a while to get tired of it. Or you could just make coleslaw over and over, which would be fine with me, especially if it were a less creamy (or completely uncreamy) version with olive oil, vinegar, soy sauce, sesame oil, a little paprika and a lot of mustard. You could add some diced hot pepper (you have either a long pale green Anaheim or a blunter, dark green Ancho, neither particularly hot) or cilantro too.

I did not expect to be handing out peas again. The vines ought to have died back by now. Instead, they decided to flower heavily. Worse tings have happened.

The peas are not the only plants that decided to start bearing heavily this week. The squash, of course, continues to produce more than we need. The cucumbers went into full scale production (I hope—the idea of them producing even more fruit than they did this week is a little frightening). The peppers are covered with fruit. Best of all, though, I think, is the sudden abundance of eggplant. I understand that some people do not like eggplant, but I do not understand why. I know that the eggplants in the grocery store can be unpleasantly bitter and spongy, but you cannot blame eggplants for that. Try a fresh one and you will understand how good they can be. Just peel and slice one, brush it oil and grill it until it is soft and nicely charred (as opposed to unpleasantly charred). It makes a great pizza topping and it is excellent cold in a sandwich with mozzarella and basil. Or dice it and mix it with diced grilled squash and leeks, marinate the mixture in olive oil, a dash of vinegar, a little smoked paprika, garlic and generous amount of salt and serve it cold topped with chopped basil.

Well, there you are. You have a cabbage—again—and I have no rules at all to guide me. I am not sure who has made out better.