

THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS - 25 August 2005

Last Sunday morning we were walking along a road in southern Quebec on the shore of Lake Memphremagog. At least, Liz and I were. Sam and Will did just about everything but walk. They jumped and hopped and marched and skipped and raced and kicked stones and backtracked and sidled and dawdled and jogged and circled. And eventually, of course, one of them fell over. Fortunately, it was Sam, who has a less dramatic response to pain than his brother. He simply stood up, inspected his palms for blood and, not finding enough to merit discussion, continued on his roundabout way. Watching Sam check his hands for cuts caused me to look at my own hands. They were oddly clean and undamaged and it occurred to me that I had gone an entire week without causing myself to bleed. That is how a farmer knows he has been on vacation.

Farming is physical work, especially small scale organic farming. We do as much as we can with tractors, but there are tasks that cannot be done mechanically, tasks we lack the equipment to do mechanically and tasks we would do mechanically if only the tractor or the right piece of equipment were not broken. We pull weeds and push seeders and pry roots out of the ground with pitchforks (until the tines fall off, anyway). We lift eighty-pound tubs of potatoes and heave pieces of equipment into place and carry piles of tools out to the fields and piles of vegetables out of the fields. And we walk a lot. Seeding four beds of fall greens entails walking more than a mile—while twisting ones body sideways to push a seeder through rocky soil. On the other hand, retrieving the hoes from the cucumber patch is a mere quarter mile stroll. By the end of the week our legs are tired, our backs stiff, and our hands covered with cuts.

Given all the effort, you might think farming would be good exercise. I used to believe that I would get stronger and stronger as the season went on, and by the end I would be able to run for miles, bike effortlessly up mountainsides, cross country ski hour after hour. Instead, by the time we have packed the last bag, pulled up the last piece of drip tape, scrubbed out the last tub and swept the last of the dirt from the packing room, I can barely climb a flight of stairs. Even though there is far less to do, the final weeks of the season are a sort of endurance test and much of the time I think I may not make it. I feel like an old phonograph winding down and there is always the chance I will come to a complete stop before the end of the song.

Age, no doubt, has something to do with it. If I were as young as my workers I too might feel like playing basketball all weekend. And if I were as young as my sons I would have too much energy to walk in a straight line and after dinner I would want nothing more than to go out and chase someone around the house. But even my workers, Jacob and Andrew, though nearly twenty years younger than me, are worn down at the end of the week. Andrew had to admit that Friday night basketball is tough.

And yet farming is not simply a form of physical erosion. We get ground down, but because we keep on working, not because we are soft. We may not be doing the proper training for a marathon and there are plenty of guys in gyms who can bench press more than we can. But what farming does exercise is our capacity to keep going despite the discomfort, despite the fatigue, despite the boredom and despite all those cuts on our hands, to keep going until we have packed that last bag. And then we fall over.

This week's share: Carrots, Cucumbers, Onion, Peppers, Hot peppers, Potatoes, Squash, Tomatoes (may include any of the following varieties: Black Prince, Brandywine, Carolina Gold, Cherokee Purple, Czech Excellent Yellow, Evergreen, First Lady II, German Green, Green Zebra, Hi Beef, Manyel, Mountain Fresh, New Girl, Nyagous, Persimmon, Pineapple, Pink Beauty, Rose de Berne, Sun Chief, Sun Gold, Sun Start, Sunsugar, Ultra Sweet, Valencia and Valley Girl), Basil, Parsley

This week's news: This is tomato week. Obviously, you have had tomatoes the past few weeks, and you should continue to get them for several more weeks after this. But this will probably be the largest share of them this season. Certainly, Jacob and Andrew are hoping so. It is not that they object to tomatoes. In fact, they like them. Jacob has been carefully tasting all the varieties (he thinks Pineapple is the best, though he also like Rose de Berne). But they are getting a little tired of picking so many. Luckily for them, the increasingly cold nights will soon slow down the plants' growth and then various diseases will run amok and defoliate them and there will be no more tomato picking this year. For now, though, there are a lot of tomatoes, so here is a big bag of them and a big bunch of basil to go with them.

I never tire of tomato salad (at least, not during tomato season; the out of season tomatoes in grocery stores are tiresome no matter how you eat them), especially with onion. There are some people who claim that a tomato salad should only have good olive oil and salt and pepper for dressing, but I like mine with some vinegar (though less than I would put in a green salad dressing). You can also turn your tomato salad into an excellent sandwich simply by putting it on a good, crusty baguette with enough dressing to soak into the bread a bit.

If you do tire of tomato salad there are approximately a four hundred thousand other tasty things you can make with your tomatoes. I will not list them all here, but I will mention a few. You could make gazpacho, adding a pepper and a hot pepper and garnish it with diced cucumber and croutons (by which I mean not those thoroughly crunchy packaged things but cubes of fresh bread browned in olive oil so that they are crisp and fruity on the outside, but still slightly chewy inside). You could slice up a couple of tomatoes and fry them for breakfast with some eggs and bacon and onion. You could cut the top off some tomatoes, gently squeeze out the pulp replace it with a mixture of breadcrumbs, diced onion, chopped herbs (such as parsley and basil), grated cheese and olive oil, and bake the stuffed tomatoes until they are soft and the stuffing is slightly browned on top. Or you could deep fry a tomato.

I am not actually sure I would recommend the last preparation, but it is Fair week in Washington County and traditionally during Fair week I recommend that you deep fry everything in your bag (and the bag too). Sticking anything you can get your hands on into hot oil is the best way to celebrate Washington County's agricultural industry. Well, that and

Fruit share: no fruit this week