

**Don't forget the work day this Saturday starting at 10 am.**



## **THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS**

### **3 August 2006**

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Last week the white hen decided to start destroying the lettuce in the small greenhouse. Not that she has anything against lettuce. In fact, she rather enjoys a leaf or two every now and then. But she was neither carrying out a vendetta against the lettuce nor consuming it. Instead, she seemed keenly interested in something underneath the lettuce, something she could only get at by scratching up the dirt with her bony feet. The lettuce just happened to get in the way.

There was, of course, an easy way to stop this lettuce massacre—and any possible subsequent attacks on innocent vegetables. Stringing up chicken wire on the outside of the greenhouse was not it. And yet that, and not wringing her neck, was the solution I choose.

Putting up the wire proved a less onerous task than I feared (which is not something I get to say often). I already had a roll of chicken wire and a bag of cable ties and a decent pair of wire cutters. I didn't have to go to Wiley's for more supplies (which is not something I get to say often) and the whole job took me not much more than an hour and only minor amounts of swearing. Plus the greenhouse looks kind of cool now—as if we were growing a dangerous vegetable that had to be caged in lest it run free and force its way down some poor child's gullet. Just imagine the terror in the land if there were some piece of produce on the loose that could compel Americans to follow the USDA's dietary guidelines. We would all have to beg white hen to come to the rescue.

That putting up chicken wire on a greenhouse proved relatively easy and aesthetically pleasing cannot, however, answer the pressing question of why I choose to go to any effort at all to find a way for the white hen and the lettuce to coexist (on either side of a fence). Perhaps it was my own small way of demonstrating how a little creative intervention from a superpower can produce if not actual harmony then at least a lasting peace between implacable foes. Perhaps, by respecting the white hen's essential chicken nature rather than punishing her for it—by accepting and nonviolently redirecting her natural habits when they were at odds with my interests—I was offering an example of how we can coexist meaningfully with other species. And maybe I am pathetically soft hearted about our farm animals.

I feel fairly certain most of our neighbors, faced with the white hen's destructive behavior, would have put a pot on the stove and started making dumplings. They are perfectly capable of sentimentality towards animals. Eddie Lamb talks fondly of the bird dog he had when he was a kid. Stewart Skiff has two pet billy goats whose irritating habits only amuse him. Red English takes in the abandoned lambs and bottle feeds them in his kitchen. But they are not fools. When an old chicken starts ripping up your crops you don't spend a lot of time trying to see it from her perspective. You can always get another chicken.

I confess my initial inclination the second time I found the white hen shredding lettuce was to give her head a quick twist and be done with it. It was not lack of opportunity that stopped me. I chased her down. But I just threw her in the pen with the little chickens. I like having her wandering around the yard. I often find her napping with Hudson outside the doghouse. And I know her life story. Will's class hatched her (well, they did not actually sit on a nest for 21 days) and they brought her and her ten incubator mates out to the farm when they were a few weeks old. She turned out to be the only white chicken in the bunch and she was singled out for special treatment, meaning that the roosters (six out of the eleven) found her more attractive than the other hens and the other hens tried to kill her (our own little chicken soap opera). She was raped and pecked all day and quickly learned to fly up into one of the apple trees to escape both her admirers and tormentors. Eventually she decided to live apart from other chickens and I let her. I knew a free range chicken posed a threat to the vegetables, but I could not make her live with the others.

## **This week's share: Arugula, Cabbage, Cucumbers, Eggplant, Garlic, Leeks, Lettuce, Peppers, Hot peppers, Yukon Gold potatoes, Squash, Tomatoes, Basil**

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The one time I put her back in the chicken pen, after some previous attack on my crops, the other hens nearly killed her.

I guess if I really want the white hen dead and lack the will to off her myself I can always hire the other chicken to carry out the hit. I am not ready to do that yet. But if I ever find her destroying my eggplant crop I may. I like eggplant. I even like the eggplant you find in grocery stores though it is almost always too large and not nearly fresh enough. So I really like eggplant fresh from my own field, picked before it has gone seedy and bitter (I would be bitter too if I were a potentially tasty vegetable picked past my prime). That it is not always easy to grow in this climate only makes producing a good crop that much more fun. And we have a good crop this year. We have found a few reliable varieties and we gave them raised beds and plastic mulch and plenty of fertilizer and in this difficult year they have responded enthusiastically. I understand, however, that some people do not respond so enthusiastically to them. All I can say is give them another try and see if the reason you don't like eggplant is because you have not had enough good ones before.

I don't know that fresh cabbage tastes radically better than the well traveled cabbage in grocery stores. But it tastes good. I like it in coleslaw, which I prefer with a dressing of olive oil, vinegar, mustard, a bit of sesame oil and perhaps a little hot pepper or paprika.

I cannot compare the leeks you have to anything in the grocery store because grocery stores do not sell leeks like this. In fact, I don't know if anyone does. These are a leek experiment. We planted them in bunches like scallions and picked them young. I have not eaten any yet, so all I can say is that I hope they are tender and that you can at the very least use them as you would bigger leeks (if that is any help). You could brush them with oil and grill them whole. Cold grilled leeks would go well in a salad with cold grilled eggplant and pepper, some tomato and basil and perhaps a sprinkling of capers.

Perhaps I will have had a chance to cook some of the leeks by Saturday, in which case I can offer further suggestions when you all come out to help weed the carrots and beets (and with enough help we could probably also weed and mulch the chard and trellis the pole beans and pull garlic). In the meantime, I can offer suggestions on how to get to the farm. Start by finding Route 40 North (it starts at the second traffic light on Route 7 beyond the Troy side of the Collar City Bridge). Take Route 40 approximately 18 miles into Washington County to Meeting House Road (which is marked and 5.6 miles past the light in Schaghticoke by the Fairgrounds). Turn right onto Meeting House. After 1.5 miles you will come to a fork where the paved road curves right but you continue straight ahead onto the dirt road. Go over the hill to the next intersection (Cooke Hollow Road). The stop sign there is in our front yard (dark blue house, two red barns, greenhouses). The farm is 30 miles and approximately 45 minutes from downtown Albany. Bring lunch (we will provide drinks and dessert), sturdy footwear, children, friends (but please leave your dogs and chickens at home). We will start our tasks at 10 am and work until people have had enough. Then we will eat and enjoy the view of nicely weeded beds of vegetables. I hope you will join us.

**Fruit share: No fruit this week. Ken, the berry grower, called me yesterday to say he is, unexpectedly, done for the year. I will try to find a few more berries elsewhere. And apple season starts soon.**