



THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS

30 August 2007

It is amazing what happens on the farm when you go away for a week. Or at least when I do. Fond as we are of our members, I must confess that your travel plans rarely have a profound effect on farm operations. Not, in any event, one we are aware of, though if any of you feel you can make it rain here or motivate us to take on more carrot weeding by going on vacation, then I urge you to pack your bags.

While I am at it, I suppose I should further clarify that I mean when I go away for a week in the middle of the growing season. I can head off in February and return to the farm to find that everything remains frozen in place just as we left it—possibly including the chickens. But in late August nothing on the farm remains frozen in place and abandoning it for a week, or a day, or possibly even an hour, would cause irreparable chaos. The plants, sensing like good little millenarians that the end is nigh, have entered their desperate phase, a sort of vegetative free-for-all. A couple of drunk hockey teams could hardly do more to destroy the order we work so hard to maintain in the fields. The lamb's quarters, pig weed and crab grass clamber over the crops and one another in a final effort to soak up the last strong rays of sunshine and set prodigious quantities of seed. Without considerable assistance, the effete crops are soon lost beneath the brawling weeds, and lie, pale and beaten, on the ground. And the ones we have kept clear of the fray are engaged in their own frantic reproductive efforts so that we have to go out and pick every ten or twelve minutes in order to keep up. After this week's bags were packed—and packed as full as ever they should be—we still had thirty tubs of tomatoes left and that is without us having bothered to pick any of the fourteen million or so ripe cherry tomatoes on the vines outside.

Well, the crops are either producing a ridiculous superabundance or falling over dead. Just as the plants are running riot, so are the fungi and viruses, thriving on plants weakened by their own efforts to produce seed. When I left, the squash and cucumbers, despite some signs of stress, were still producing far more fruit than we needed. Even after we had tossed away everything too large—in the process creating a 2400 square foot green and yellow mosaic on two bare beds at the edge of the patch—culled the inferior fruits for pig food, handed out far more than anybody wanted and sold as much as possible at market, we still managed to give away 36 tubs of extra cucumbers and squash. I returned to discover 10 rows of dead plants. At first, I assumed some member driven over the edge by an excess of cucumbers had driven out and done them in. But then it occurred to me that the workers, weary of picking the damn things three times a week, were far more likely suspects. I cannot rule that out—or blame them if they did it—but I would guess that some disease, spread by squash bugs and pickers, simply had its way with the exhausted plants.

In some cases (possibly including the squash and cukes), falling over dead is what we wanted the crops to do. We cannot pull the onions and shallots for storage until the tops collapse. Only then are the bulbs properly protected. We brought in the last onions on Monday and now the floor of the hay mow is covered with curing alliums. In addition five hundred or so bunches of garlic hang on wires above them.

We did not have to wait for the potato plants to die before digging the tubers. But

This week's share: Beans, Carrots, Cucumbers, Eggplant, Lettuce, Melon, Onion, Peppers, Hot peppers, Potatoes, Tomatoes, Cherry tomatoes, Basil, Thyme

doing so ensures that the skins are set, which matters when you are running your potatoes through a barrel washer (which we do because two people using it can wash 460 pounds of potatoes in about 10 minutes, a task that four people with hoses would do—and do worse—in about an hour) . Dig the tubers while the plants are alive and the tender skins get pretty badly beaten up during the washing, making them not only less attractive but also more prone to rotting. Wait until the plants have died and the cleaned tubers pour out the end of the washer looking they way they should.

Speaking of falling over dead, there's a small chance you might do so after eating some of these hot peppers. Andrea took a tiny taste of one yesterday and though we hosed her down was still smoldering several hours later. The pepper in question was orange, somewhat crinkly, pointed and aptly named Fatali. A Habanero, small, crinkly, roundish and bright red, would likely have caused much the same effect. We have a customer at market who buys them by the basket and claims to eat them straight, with a beer chaser. He reports it is a great way to work up a healthy sweat. So is sitting in the oven. I cannot in good conscience recommend that anyone follow his example. I can, however, recommend that anyone who likes hot (well, extremely hot) food consider cooking with one (or part of one) of these peppers. They have a wonderful fruity tropical flavor—at least for a second or two until your tongue ignites. As for the rest of you, just call in the local bomb squad. They will be fully equipped to dispose of your pepper.

Fortunately, the rest of the food in your bag poses no threats to your health. In fact, unlike much of the food in this country, it might even be good for you. In all sorts of ways. I would explain how, but it is easier just to suggest that you read Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. The prose could use some serious pruning. It appears to have been pointlessly bulked up in order to make the book bigger, probably on the theory that a book on a weighty topic actually has to be weighty. Nonetheless, Pollan makes a reasonable case for local, sustainable farming.

I read the book last week. I don't know why I decided to spend my vacation reading about my job, but I did. Well, not the whole vacation. I found time between chapters to swim in a lake and eat the local cheese and pate and bread.

Meanwhile, back on the farm, farming simply went on. The crops were picked and packed and delivered. I doubt any of you noticed I was not there. Nor, as far as I can tell, did the crops. Apparently my travel plans do not have a profound effect on farm operations either. I went away for a week and what happened on the farm was the same as what would have happened if I had never left. That is amazing in the best possible way. I think maybe next time I will go away for a month.