



THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS

14 September 2006

My wife keeps telling me that I am not making the work day this Sunday sound enticing. The problem, she says, is that I keep talking about the work. She is afraid nobody will be lured to the farm, no matter how lovely the view, the weather or the company, if coming here means you have to pick potatoes or weed carrots.

She may have a point. Certainly, I have failed so far this year to entice her to do either of these chores. Come to think of it, I don't recall ever getting her to do either. She has helped with garlic planting at least twice and picked a lot of berries for our own use and I have a vague feeling she may have done some other farm chore a decade or so ago. But at this point Sam has done considerably more farm labor than Liz has. He helped me transplant the last two batches of lettuce and he and Will came out in the rain with me to pull onions a few weeks ago (they seemed to think that getting muddy makes the work more enjoyable).

It would be nice, theoretically, to have Liz work with me. But we would be in serious trouble if it turned out she enjoyed it and wanted to do it all the time. Liz has a real job. If she gave it up in order to spend her days weeding and picking we would have to find a way to support ourselves entirely by farming, which is hard to imagine doing. That or I would have to get a real job, which is even harder to imagine.

Just because Liz can think of better things to do, however, does not mean that farm work is unappealing to everyone. Despite having done it six days a week since late May, Greg misses it now that he has gone back to college. I always thought that one of the reasons to have a farm job was that it made going to school seem so much more appealing. I have considered charging the parents of reluctant students to have their offspring spend a summer toiling on the farm. But apparently it is not working for Greg, which is particularly odd since he knows perfectly well that we are still picking beans every week. Even calculus ought to seem enthralling compared to picking beans.

Perhaps what Greg misses, other than the opportunity to eat carrots all day, is the pleasure of tangible results. We do not attend meetings, devise strategic plans, give sales pitches, negotiate executive compensation packages or sit in on conference calls with regional managers. At the end of each day we can go around the farm and point out the direct physical evidence of our efforts: a bed of broccoli transplants, a swath of row cover over the fall greens, a pile of weeds next to the strawberries, a trellis for the peas, tubs of washed potatoes, the dirt on our hands and knees.

These are, admittedly, minor triumphs. We don't achieve great things, the things that get you on the evening news and earn you shiny medals from world leaders. We don't extend the frontiers of knowledge or bridge the gaps between cultures. But when we finish a task we can see what we were sweating over. And at the end of the row there's a pleasure to hefting those tubs of potatoes onto the wagon—to actually feeling the weight of your work—that most modern occupations rarely afford you.

Farm work day this Sunday, September 17th, starting at noon

This week's share: Beans, Carrots, Chard, Eggplant, German Porcelain garlic, Candy onion, Peppers, Hot peppers, Amey russet potatoes, Squash, Tomatoes, Purple basil, Thyme

Plus picking the food you eat makes it taste better. This is in part because the effort involved in picking your food gives you a good, honest appetite and hunger makes things taste better. In part it is because the food you pick is generally fresher than anything else you eat, and freshness improves flavor. But it is more than that. The effort also makes you appreciate that food in a different way. Knowing where it came from and what it took to get it onto your plate gives it more flavor. I recognize this may sound nonsensical, the ravings of a man who has spent too long in the bean patch. But the effect is real. And the best way to understand it—the only way really—is to experience it yourself.

I know that the best baked potatoes I have ever eaten were a couple of russet potatoes I dug one autumn morning—it was the first time I grew russet potatoes—and baked for my lunch. Obviously it is a little late for you to dig up the potatoes in your bag (well, I suppose you could go out in the yard and bury them and then dig them up). But there are two reasons not to despair. First, you can still make tasty baked potatoes, even if you did not dig them up. The potatoes are fresh and making tasty baked potatoes is easy (unfortunately, so too is making bad baked potatoes, which happens far too often). For a start, no matter how strong a temptation you feel to wrap the potatoes in foil, resist. Baking potatoes that way should be made into crime—foilonious assault on a vegetable. Instead, put the naked potatoes into a hot oven (at least 400 degrees) and bake them until the skin feels dry and brittle and the inside feels soft (the baking time varies with the size of the potatoes, but the general rule is to leave them in the oven until you think they should be done and then bake them another 30 minutes). The result should be a light, almost fluffy interior surrounded by a well flavored, crisp potato skin crust.

The second reason not to lose hope is that you can come to the farm this Sunday and pick your own russet potatoes (if you want we will wash off a few and toss them in my oven and you can reward yourself for all the hard work with a good baked potato). You can also pick three kinds of fingerling potatoes, three kinds of yellow potatoes, some red ones, some white ones and even a few that are red or blue inside and out. Will this involve work? Yes, but nothing too strenuous (you pull the potatoes out of the loose soil and put them in sacks), and when you are done you will be able to look at the sacks full of potatoes piled on the wagon and know just what you have done. And every week for the rest of the season, when you take the potatoes out of your bag, you will know that you had a hand in harvesting them and they will taste better.

To get to the farm go to Route 40 North (it starts in Troy at Route 7 just east of the Collar City bridge). Stay on 40 all the way into Washington County to Meeting House Road (which is 5.6 miles past the light in Schaghticoke by the fairgrounds). Turn right on Meeting House. After a mile and a half you will come to a fork in the road; go straight ahead onto the dirt road (the pavement curves right up a hill) and continue to the first intersection and stop sign, which is in our front yard (we have a dark blue house, two red barns, greenhouses).

Bring children, friends and sturdy shoes, but no dogs please (there are a bunch of chickens and ducks running around the yard). We will provide drinks and dessert (and baked potatoes). Feel free to bring your lunch and have a picnic on the farm and wander around the fields. And maybe if you implore Liz she will come out and harvest potatoes too.

Fruit share (in separate bag): Gala apples and Bartlet pears from Borden