

THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS - 22 September 2005

Our neighbors have a beagle. She probably has a name, though knowing the Herringtons they may not have gotten around to giving her one yet. They have only had her for three years. Well, if they are still looking I would be happy to suggest one: The Annoying Puppy. That is what I have always called her. And she has always done her best to deserve it. Every time we go to our two fields by the Herrington's house—and we go there frequently—The Annoying Puppy comes out to greet us. She does that by running to us straight across the field, right over whatever crops happen to be in her path, and trying to jump up and lick our faces. Fortunately, being a beagle, she cannot jump much past one's knees, though that's less of a comfort when you are crouching down trying to weed a bed of beets or pick a flat of cherry tomatoes. She is not a stupid dog but she does not understand "down" no matter how you say it and she thinks "go away you annoying puppy" is a command to roll around on her back submissively, usually on top of the crop you are trying to tend. Despite her ridiculously short legs she runs everywhere, making a panting, grunting noise a bit like a steam locomotive going up a steep hill. And once she has tried to lick everyone's face and chugged back and forth over the vegetables a few times she disappears into the hedgerow. And soon she is baying to let us know she is on a rabbit's trail. She will run and bay for hours, the high pitched whine of her voice carrying up and down the length of our road.

She may be annoying, but she is a fine rabbit dog. Last fall while Jacob and I were picking shell beans, we watched her track a rabbit she had flushed from the tall weeds back and forth across the field below us for over half an hour. The rabbit used all its rabbitry tricks to get away: circling, doubling back, going to earth. Frequently, it managed to fool The Annoying Puppy, but not for long. She would trot back and forth puzzling over the rabbit's disappearance until she figured out what it had done and then the chase would start again. The Herrington's oldest boy, a keen rabbit hunter himself, may have trained The Annoying Puppy a bit, but for the most part she was running on instinct. Chasing rabbits is what she was made for.

I suppose she enjoys the chase. She certainly puts a lot of energy into it. But I cannot help feeling that she does it more for us than for herself. Her baying sounds less like a cry of joy than a rebuke: "I found you a rabbit; now why aren't you coming to get it?" And it is starting to make me feel guilty. She is not my beagle and I never asked her to help me hunt rabbits. In fact, I don't hunt rabbits and all I have ever asked of her is that she leave me alone. That said, she is only doing the job people bred her to perform. It was not, I imagine her wild ancestors' plan to become a stumpy,

insufferably peppy, droopy eared relentless rabbit chaser. We made her that that way to suit our own purpose.

Unlike the deer and the bugs and the rabbits (at least when not being chased by beagles), who are naturally pests, The Annoying Puppy is one by design, and the design is ours. As usual we did not consider all the consequences. We came up with a neat solution to a problem—how to get rabbits to run around in the open while we stand still and shoot them—and now that solution is running over my vegetables and barking all day.

Still, she's not, of course, such a burden compared, say, to nuclear waste or mountains of garbage or fertilizer runoff or car crashes or lethal drug interactions or corporate accounting scams or the current Congress of the United States (now there's a group that knows something about running amok and yapping) or epidemic obesity or Los Angeles. She is an annoying puppy, but I can live with her.

**This week's share: Carrots, Eggplant, Garlic, Leeks, Lettuce, Mustard mix,
Onions, Peppers,
Hot peppers, Potatoes, Radishes, Tomatoes, Anise hyssop, Cilantro**

This week's news: I started my forties this week just as I started my thirties a decade ago: on my knees in the dirt. And as long as I stay down there not much seems to have changed. Yes, the farm and the tractor are a bit bigger, the crops are in better shape and I have two people down there in the dirt with me pulling weeds. But it's the same job with the same frustrations (what are the weeds doing there this late in the season after all the times we tilled these beds?) and the same pleasures (the wilting lamb's quarters, purslane and pig weed piled up behind us, the neat rows of healthy greens revealed). With mud up to my elbows and dew soaking through the knees of my pants and my thoughts wandering as my hands reach out to uproot the weeds, I could still be thirty. And then I get to the end of the bed and stand up and get a sharp reminder of my age as I try to straighten out.

At least the beds of fall greens and turnips look good. I thought we would not have to weed them at all, but the weeds had other ideas. Fortunately, however, the crops appear to have thrived on the competition. In fact, if anything they are doing too well. A number of them will be ready to pick sooner than we want. We find ourselves in the unusual position of having to decide what can wait to be picked (rather than trying to figure out what will possibly be ready in time).

There was no question this week that the mustard mix had to be harvested. We could have picked it two weeks ago as fancy micro salad greens but there would not have been much to go around. Now that the greens (red, green and purple mustard, tatsoi, bok choy, yukina savoy, komatsuna, mizuna, red and white Russian kale, Chinese cabbage and the occasional stalk of grass) are larger they can be used as cooking greens (stir fry them, braise them, put them in a soup). But you could still put them in a salad too.

There was no question this week that we would not be harvesting any eggplants. The only real question was whether or not we would harvest any more this season. Usually by the middle of September eggplants lose heart and start to drop their leaves and produce stunted, yellowish fruits. So I was surprised when Jacob and Andrew returned from the field up the road and told me they had picked enough eggplants for everyone. Apparently the eggplants have enjoyed the recent warmth and rain as much as the fall greens have.

The tomatoes, however, have not. Not enough, in any event, to recover from their terminal decline. They have worked hard and well this summer and now they have had enough. There will still be a few tomatoes next week, perhaps even the week after, but the plants are not making new fruit and many of the remaining tomatoes on the vines will succumb to diseases.

**Fruit share: Gala apples, Stanley plums and Bartlett pears from O.A.
Borden and Sons, Easton**