

THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS - 8 September 2005

We seem to have entered the age of corporate ingenuity. It's not that we don't make clever things anymore. After all, there is not just Coke, but Coke without sugar, Coke without caffeine, Coke without carbohydrates and even Coke without Coke (who would have thought we would spend billions of dollars on bottles of tap water). Nor have we lost the ability to find efficient new ways to manufacture these products. It turns out there's no end of Chinese political prisoners and Bangladeshi children eager to cast and mold and knit an infinite number of consumer goods for practically no pay at all. As wonderful as it is, however, to live in a country where we have piles of cheaply made movie tie-in action figures to dole out with hamburgers and fries, our economy has apparently matured beyond the stage of making useful objects efficiently.

That was all very well back when people still actually needed basic things, back when most people spent their lives on necessary activities like feeding and clothing and sheltering themselves. They lacked time and money for many amusements. A faster reaper or cheaper nails or stronger twine offered them advantages for which they were willing to pay. And so people improved on everyday objects. Around here, for instance, industrious men turned their minds to inventing better plows, which they produced in small local factories, often little more than forges really. They were aided in their work by their firsthand knowledge of the use of a plow.

I don't mean to suggest that these plow men were guided solely by altruism. In fact, altruism had nothing to do with it. There was no golden age of selfless American entrepreneurs. But, despite the greed and brutality, making something that would make peoples' lives better—by simplifying or speeding up a common task, by lowering the price of a staple good—was good business. Obviously, making these products more cheaply was good business too. So people found ways not just to improve the plow, but to improve the production of plows. These new production systems were rarely kind to the workers or the environment, but what are a few crushed bodies compared to the march of progress. The industrial loom, the oil derrick, the steel foundry, the rotary printing press, barbed wire, the telephone, tarmac worked their magic, turning a pretty grim life on the frontier into one long shopping spree in the heartland.

Modern America is a vast testament to the wonders of industrialization. We empty the Colorado River into the desert to grow lettuce that we truck three thousand miles to sell in farming communities alongside chemical oven cleaners, individually packaged high protein breakfast bars and magazines for old car collectors. You can drive from the East Coast to the West, eating the same meal every night of your trip, and get your transmission rebuilt when you get to California

And yet American business seems to have grown bored with industrialization. The thrill of inventing ever better ways to churn out ever better widgets has faded. Manufacturing is messy and expensive and Americans already have everything they need. Running a factory is like weeding a field, necessary work perhaps, but mindless and best left to someone else. There are still those who tinker with medical devices and

computer chips, but we have focused our ingenuity on business itself. Now keen minds are set to the task of fine tuning management techniques, honing corporate images and engineering takeovers.

The bottom line is a company's real product now, and American business's greatest sales job was convincing consumers to care more about corporate profits than about the quality of their toasters and tires. We follow the daily fluctuations of the stock market more keenly than any Roman ever watched for auguries and try to convince ourselves that somehow killer drugs and cars that tip over are the government's fault while executives shift money offshore and find ever more creative ways to avoid paying taxes.

Apparently we are supposed to celebrate this. We are the envy of the world. And while I am glad I don't have to do the laundry by hand, I cannot help thinking that if all history was leading here surely someone could have come up by now with a washing machine that actually gets my socks clean.

This week's share: Beets, Chard, Celery, Garlic, Lettuce, Melon, Onions, Pepper, Hot peppers (dark green Ancho or pale, pointed New Mex and assorted hotter peppers with tomatoes), Russet potatoes, Tomatoes, Basil, Cilantro,

This week's news: It feels as though the season is almost over. There's cold dew on the tractor seat every morning (sitting on it helps to wake you up). We transplanted the last crop out to the field on Monday (three trays of tatsoi) and sowed the last trays in the greenhouse over a week ago. All the winter squash and pumpkins have been harvested and we might actually run out of things to weed soon. We have started cleaning up the fields: plowing under patches where the crop is finished, sowing winter cover crops, pulling out drip irrigation lines. There are still plenty of tasks—we have to clean up the onions, select garlic for seed stock, dig the remaining twenty-three rows of potatoes, pull tomato stakes, sweep out the greenhouse—but there is less of a constant sense of urgency, of something getting away from us, of jobs piling up faster than we can do them.

Apparently, most of the plants feel that the season is almost over too. The summer squash have given up (we picked eleven this week) and the cucumbers are following their example. The eggplants are slowing, the hot peppers are all ripening, the brussels sprouts are starting to form. And every weed in every field, no matter how small and scrawny, no matter how many times it has been mowed, no matter what, is trying to set seed.

It is tempting to start thinking about what we will do with all our free time. There are soups to be made, books to be read, walls to be painted, paths to be walked, clouds to be stared at. Oh, and then there are all those vegetables we have to pick and pack and deliver to your for the next two months. It may feel like our work is almost finished, but we have only done just over half the deliveries for the season. I can think of sixteen crops we have not handed out at all yet I am probably forgetting a couple of others. We just put fourteen hundred lettuce seedlings in the big high tunnel and we have so far seeded over a mile of fall greens and roots. Aside from all those potatoes still in the ground, there are nine beds of carrots we have not touched, three beds of broccoli, two plantings of cabbage, four beds of beets, several hundred thousand hot peppers and way more tomatoes than I thought.

Speaking of crops we have not handed out yet, here is some celery. Unfortunately, we had to rip some of the plants apart because the centers decided to disintegrate, so you may find you have a bunch of loose stems. It is not as pretty, but it adds up to the same thing as a whole plant. As for what to do with this celery, you will find that, unlike the stuff in stores, it actually has a distinct flavor (the flavor of celery, oddly enough). Consequently, you may want to treat it as much like a herb as a vegetable.

You may want to treat the small hot peppers in your tomato bag as biological warfare agents. Some of them may be extremely hot—particularly the small, roundish (as opposed to smoothly round) ones with indented ends, which as Caribbean Red habaneros. At their hottest (there is considerable

Fruit share: no fruit this week - apples and, I hope, plums next week