



The Alleged Farm News

21 October, 2021

This week's share: Apples, Bald head, Napa cabbage, Garlic, Kossak kohlrabi, Leeks, Lemon grass, Onions, Peppers, Hot peppers, Acorn squash, Zucchini

A sensible farmer leafing through a seed catalog and happening upon Bald Head would probably just turn the page. And even if he paused to read the description of this unusual root crop, a member of the mustard family, even if he were intrigued to discover that such a thing exists, he wouldn't think to himself "there's an odd vegetable; I should try growing it."

To be clear, I have never described myself as a sensible farmer. I barely ever even describe myself as a farmer. Under duress, I might confess to having a small vegetable farm, or say that I grow vegetables. While my job would make me something of a curiosity if I ever went to a college reunion, I don't avoid the title because I am ashamed. I am just not sure I merit it given what I do. Well, that and I tend not to divulge a lot of biographical information anyway.

Vegetable notes: I am fairly sure this is the weirdest box of the year. Napa cabbage is not that unusual, but it is usually not magenta. Kohlrabi is a bit of an oddball to begin with, and giant kohlrabi especially so. Lemon grass is perfectly ordinary if you are Thai or Caribbean, but it's not a standard northern crop. The apples are an assortment of antique varieties that might have been common enough in specific locations a couple of centuries ago (the little russet is either a Golden or Roxbury Russet, and one of the oldest named varieties in America), but they are rarely grown now. Fennel is not a major vegetable crops in this country. And then there's the Bald Head. I trust the zucchini at least has proved reassuringly familiar even if the fact that we still have zucchini well into October is odd and you are thinking that you have seen enough of it for one season.

You can use red Napa just like you do the green (slaw, stir fry, soup). I think the Kossak is better than the smaller varieties. You could slice some up to use in a dip and make a salad (yogurt, lemon juice, garlic, herbs, a touch of hot pepper) and steam some. Toss the lemon grass in a chicken soup (bruise it first to get out more flavor) or make simple syrup with it and put it in a cocktail with lime juice, hot pepper, fresh mint and mescal. You know what to do with apples, whatever their history. You are on your own with the fennel because Liz does not let me cook with it. And as for the Bald Head (the green-topped root), you could shred it into a slaw with kohlrabi or pickle it or stir fry it. Or hang onto it and show it to your friends when you are telling them about the weird stuff you get in a CSA share.

As for sensible, that's a slippery word. Most of us think sensible sounds like a good thing, and we probably have an idea of what it means in specific situations. What, for instance, the sensible thing to do is when applying for a job or making dinner or being attacked by a shark. But that doesn't mean we agree on exactly what's sensible. Some of us might suggest you should punch the shark in the nose, and some of us might say that sensible people would not make themselves susceptible to shark attacks in the first place. And then some of us might say to hell with sensible, live a little.

So it's not clear what makes you a sensible farmer. If there is such a thing. Take a sober look at the job—the hours, the remuneration, the mud—and you might sensibly suggest a different line of work. Even if you admit, sensibly, that some people have to produce our food, it's not clear how they should sensibly do so. The standard answer in this country is that they should farm on a massive scale, grow a limited number of crops—ideally the ones for which we have subsidy programs—and achieve a viable level of production and profitability through the use of various manufactured inputs and technological advances. Increasingly, however, people think there's a more sensible way to grow food that does not harm the soil or endanger the well-being of farmers and eaters. Of course, farmers who don't grow that way consider people who believe that are kooks.

But I would guess that most of the people on either side of that debate would agree that there's nothing sensible about a farmer coming across in unheard of mustard root and deciding to grow it for his customers. Bald Head is obviously not in demand. It's not even related to something that people want. I didn't come across an unusual cousin to the melon or a curious new type of blueberry. I found what's basically an unbecoming mutant rutabaga.

Even I would agree that growing a lot of Bald Head isn't currently sensible. Maybe some day it will be a darling of the culinary world and people will grow fields of it. I went with two trays of seedlings, figuring I could hand it out once if it worked. The seed was cheap. It's not a fussy crop. I had plenty of space in the fall brassica rows for it.

I know it would be safer not to grow Bald Head. Nobody would miss it and I don't need it to fill up the share. Growing it was basically just a little extra work to hand out something I cannot vouch for and that even from its catalog description has every chance of being unloved. But I doubt it will wreck anybody's day, and there's a chance—a small chance, but still—somebody will be delighted to make its acquaintance. It is an actual crop that people in some parts of the world eat, and that we, for whatever reason, have not known about. I hope at least that meeting it will prove interesting.

Being sensible usually means constraining one's activities, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. But to be sensible is also to be aware and maybe even appreciative of things. It would be a shame to miss out on that. I suppose I aim to achieve some sort of balance by growing as wide a range of crops as I can in ways that are sustainable, reliable and ensure I provide people with good food. I try to

grow weird stuff well. I may not be a sensible farmer, but I do try to farm sensibly, and by my definition that includes growing the occasional unlikely root.