

# Farm Notes

## CSA Newsletter

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## The Politics of Flowers

by Dennis Fuze and Barbara Lamborne

Demand for local flowers is a political movement as much as it is an agriculture movement. The 1991 Andean Trade Preference Act eliminated tariffs on products from many South American and Latin American products, including flowers. The result – 80% of cut flowers sold in US were imported for the last 30 years. But that's changing, and we are a part of that change.

Local flower farmers are staging a comeback. The Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers (ASCFG), a trade group that supports flower farmers, reports consistent membership growth of 98% over the past 5 years. They attribute the increase in the number of farmers to the increased demand for local flowers by farmers' market patrons, community supported agriculture (CSA) members, florists and designers around the country.

But what's wrong with flowers from far away? There are so many environmental costs. Imported flowers are bred to ship, boxed dry, use tons of packaging and have minimal shelf life and vase



Kelley and Ellie, of Greenstone Fields, bunching flowers under the tent. A real building is in the plans for the near future.

life, even after they are back in water. They are often sprayed with pesticides, herbicides and preservatives. This is harmful to workers, as well as beneficial bugs and bacteria. They have a huge carbon footprint as well.

Local flowers, on the other hand, are harvested into plain water and put in front of customers within hours. Since they do not need to be shipped, local farmers grow a greater variety of flowers, the flowers have fragrance and they are a great value! The local relationship between farmer and customer allows consumers to know their farmer and farming practices. Purchasing local supports the local economy by providing jobs and keeps money circulating in the community. Local farming preserves a rural livelihood and saves rural land.

Everyone can join the local flower movement. Consumers can demand that their grocery stores, florists, designers and event planners use as much local product as possible and use what is in season in the local area. People can also lobby their local and national politicians to enforce imported product labeling laws to better inform consumers about where their flowers originate.

The ASCFG has produced a short video that beautifully tells the story of how flower farms, using high tunnels and greenhouses to extend the season are taking back some of that 80%. Check it out on Youtube at <https://youtu.be/PEX9UUgqqg>

Meanwhile, thank you for buying local flowers through the CSA, and thank you for supporting all of us!

# Recipe for a Useful Farm Worker



by Hana Newcomb

Ever since 1962, this farm has been hiring people who are overqualified for the job, and underqualified for the work. Most of our workers are college-educated, or perhaps on the way to college. They have loads of skills. They are generally academically successful. Usually those skills don't translate perfectly to farm work, but everyone who comes to the farm is willing and ready to learn – even if they have no idea what they will really be learning.

Recently some of us were picking beans and idly talking about the requirements for learning to be a good worker. We came up with common sense, a lot of practice – and mistakes that you can learn from.

In fact, this list is the same for all new jobs, so it's not specific enough. It helps if a person is observant – for starters, if she can tell when she is walking on plants and not grass or weeds. It helps if a person can remember a list of instructions – though usually simple, they come in a rapid sequence, and every step matters. It's good if they've used their body before, maybe as an athlete or working in a restaurant – something requiring constant motion and efficiency in movement. And it really helps if a person asks intelligent questions.

I have been watching workers pass through this farm for about 50 years now, and there is no clear formula for who is going to be a success and who is never going to be able to learn to move efficiently or tell the difference between a too-small squash and a ready-to-pick squash. It all depends on a person's capacity to pay attention and learn. And to care about the quality of her

work. It is hard to know what matters the most, when you are new to farming, and you have to rely on the experience of those around you – and be a good mimic. We can't always tell who will be a good listener and who will be oblivious to the details.

The farm workers who seem to adapt most quickly to this (tedious, repetitive, back-straining, uncomfortable) work are often athletes, artists, waiters, bakers, and people who have worked in their family business as kids. And I would say that one of the most important qualities that ensures success is mental and emotional stamina. It is much easier to pick squash every morning if picking squash doesn't actually affect your mood. It is so much easier to weed carrots for hours if you are able to keep your fingers moving fast without succumbing to boredom. Your mind can keep busy, both paying attention and thinking about a million other things.

In fact, while farming is certainly not for everyone, I believe that almost anyone can do it. We have had the most amazing people come through here, bringing their (usually brief) life experience and their spunk, and we have watched them learn so many skills in just a few months. All it really takes to be a useful farm worker is common sense, a lot of practice, the capacity to learn from mistakes as well as successes – and the sort of personality that is nice to be around while we do all the tedious and repetitive work together, day after day. You can be 80 years old or 4'10" tall or a high school kid or a retired military person with time on your hands, and if you have those qualities, you are qualified to be a useful farm worker.



From top: Hiu, 81, is the epitome of a useful farm worker; Janet Greene, veteran volunteer and Blueberry Hill neighbor, spending her morning off working at the CSA; Neighbor Odette is in her third year of volunteering at CSA.



# Postal Ghosts: Reflections in the Halloween Spirit

by Michael Lipsky

Ghosts may be said to be the spirits of beings who live no longer, but linger on in the places they inhabited when they were alive.

The arrival of the pumpkins at the farm a week ago and the anticipation of Halloween provides a fitting backdrop for contemplating some of the ghosts of Potomac Vegetable Farms; more specifically, the ghosts conjured to our attention by the Post Office and said to be residing at our street address: 9627 Leesburg Pike in Vienna, Virginia. We could call them 'ghostals.'

My first acquaintance with a "ghostal" occurred not in Virginia but from the house my first wife and I bought in Brookline, Massachusetts. We bought the house in 1970 from two sisters who had grown up there but were ready to move on five years after the death of their father at an advanced age. The father, Edwin Wilson, was a distinguished professor of mathematics at MIT.

For at least 20 years, the ghost of Professor Wilson continued to live with us, at least as far as the French academic society of which he apparently was a member was concerned. Twice a year his French confederates and their successors would communicate with him in plain grey envelopes. Respecting his privacy, we never opened them.

At PVF we are continually reminded by government agencies, well-established businesses, and nonprofit organizations that the spirits of former residents abide with us still.

Last week Mariette and I separately received notices from the Fairfax County elections board informing us of the candidates and bond issues that would be on the November ballot. Also in our mailbox was a copy of the same notice addressed to Raphael. Raphael used to live in the small apartment attached to our house. About 15 years ago he moved to British Columbia to teach high school. He married and with his wife started a family. As far as we know, he continues to live in Canada. Yet he still lives here, if the mailing from the Board of Elections is to be credited.

Another ghostal is Rachelle, who worked for the farm about eight years ago. For a while she lived in the cottage next to our house, but used our mailing address. Rachelle left the area to move to Athens, GA, and may still live there if she hasn't moved to Finland with the Finnish man she has married. However, according to the Smithsonian Institution from which she

continues to receive announcements, she may still be found at our address.

Before Rachelle the cottage was occupied for a year or two by Nicky, who died of cancer at a very young age. For maybe a two month period Nicky shared the cottage with a friend, Julia, who during this time chose to give our address to a police officer on receiving a traffic fine. For all these ensuing years Fairfax County has been trying to correspond with her to judge from the mail we receive periodically from court authorities seeking payment.

Then there are the catalogs that add to our sense that we live in a spirit gallery. Memories of Becky, who used to live in the cottage but now lives in Herndon with her husband and two children, materialize when well-known retailers send her information on sales and services to our address. Unlike the others, we have no difficulty distinguishing the spirit from the living since Becky still works for the farm and we regularly see her and her children, Rowan and Theo.

Finally, thanks to the Post Office, we know that Darryl is still with us. Darryl is a true shade, having died in his room adjacent to the barn almost two years ago. He lives on in the catalogs on horticulture and greenhouse management that we receive in his name every month or so.

One of the many changes in how we experience the world in the era of email is the definitiveness of an address. When an email address no longer applies, the internet ruthlessly informs the sender that the address is no longer valid. In the age of postal service, an address fades more slowly, lingering as if the recipient might still be there to receive a message.



Michael checks to see if there is more ghostal mail.

# Notes from the Field:

## Raining in the Crops of the Season

by Ecole Venskytis

October rushes in with heavy rain and still I find myself easing into the breath of the season. Walking through the fog of the morning past our large patch that was so recently full of winter squash, I feel an added contentment. A week ago we gathered our best muscle, ready to beat the clock and get those lovely fall vegetables out of the field before the deluge. (We got over five inches out here in Loudoun County.) Sweet potatoes galore—a few thousand pounds more than last year. And there was all that squash—kabocha, blue hubbard, acorn, so-much-butternut, and a few remaining beds of delicata—that we needed to get up off the ground and into dry, warm shelter.

Nothing says autumn like sweet potatoes. With more than half our crop out of the field and curing in our greenhouses, we had just four beds to go. Now, pulling taters behind the digger of a moving tractor should really be an Olympic event! With one person at the wheel of the tractor, two people follow close behind in

constant movement—kneeling, bending, moving forward with the machine and grabbing at potatoes and vines to keep them from falling into the narrow abyss between the digger and the ground above. You sweat. You laugh. You work as a single unit, alternating or pulling together, over and over, like a fast paced dance of tug and go. There is little time to catch your breath or talk. And with ear protection for the noise of the machine, you can't really hear the other anyway. You just have to go for it and hope you and your partner find a good groove. You reach the end, high five and breathe in deeply.

When all the sweet potatoes are dug and lying on top of the ground, you then have to

get them into ponies (1/2 bushel baskets). This is when Hana called in the troops. There were still so many taters and not a lot of time. Out came neighbors, old farmers and Stand personnel ready to help our crew. We moved again down the beds, though a little more calmly now, pulling the roots from the vines and loading our baskets. We then loaded the baskets in the backs of two pickup trucks and onto the wagon for transport to the greenhouse. We did it. A bumper crop this year! Beauregard, O'Henry and Murasaki sweet potatoes will be enjoyed by all for many weeks to come.

And then there was squash. No digger required here, you just need a nice set of

clippers. Hana came west with pallets and some humongous—Peio's favorite English word—bins, and four of us went out to the field, armed with our clippers and crates for transport, to bring in the beauties. It was an all day event. We snipped and piled in the company of story or silence or music provided by Yoella. We sorted, tossed the bad, loaded and carried. We clipped, sorted, tossed, loaded and carried some more. Sarah in her sunglasses and Phillip in his straw hat, we breathed, we sweated, enjoyed the last moments of sunshine and sweetly emptied our crates, over and over, into the bins. And then we were full, and full, and full again. Ellen came out with the loader to move them to the barn, and with our cranky pallet jack we pushed them into our newly dubbed "Hotbox." In the end, we had filled six bins and numerous crates. Our arms and backs were tired but our good humor intact, and a calm sense of accomplishment passed among us. We are abundant! And we brought it all in before washout. Whew! Nice work, team.



Ecole making piles of winter squash on the big harvest day.