

# Farm Notes

## CSA Newsletter

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POTOMAC VEGETABLE FARMS  
www.potomacvegetablefarms.com  
(703) 759-2119 ... Vienna  
(540) 882-3885 ... Purcellville

### Environmental Excellence Award in the Business Category: We Won

by Kay Fowler

My first day of work, Carrie gave me a tour of PVF East. What I saw as we toodled around in the golf cart was porous ground and rows and rows of crops ready to absorb and filter rain water. When water lands on our roads, roofs and driveways there is no filtration or capture of the water for recharging our ground water. Here at PVF East even if the Newcombs did nothing other than keep the open space away from development, I wanted them to be awarded a Fairfax County (FC) Environmental Excellence Award for doing just that.

But I learned more. PVF sells food, locally. David Orr, environmental visionary, Post Carbon Fellow and Paul Sears Distinguished Professor of Environmental Studies and

Politics among other titles gives a presentation which can be viewed on you tube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hb78lYbN4QE>) where he advocates having a "green belt" or collection of farms, in each Congressional District to provide food locally. Additionally, an article in the Bay Journal by Karl Blankenship on April 30, 2012 advocates less meat in our diets as a help to the health of the Chesapeake Bay (C-Bay) entitled: Protein-rich diet linked to Bay's unhealthy state "...Part of the reason the Bay is bloated, though, stems from consumer food choices. In recent decades, the populations of the United States and most other developed countries have moved toward protein-rich diets that require disproportionately large amounts of nitrogen to

produce. That inevitably means that more nitrogen leaks into the environment, often making it into waterways...." "To take a bite out of the Chesapeake's pollution, consumers need to watch what they put in their mouth." So PVF is putting lots of vegetables in people's mouths.

Back to what I was learning. I learned that this locally sold food is grown without pesticides. Local food grown without pesticides! And they give farm tours and hire young people! Now I knew I had a winner. The Fairfax County Environmental Excellence Awards are awarded yearly and recognize county residents, organizations, businesses and county employees who dedicate time and energy to benefit the environment and support county environmental initiatives. Award recipients are selected based on their:

- Advancement or support of the Board of Supervisors and county's environmental goals and policy statements
- Dedication of personal time and expertise beyond normal fiscal or civic responsibilities
- Leadership as a role model for others.

The awards program is administered by the Environmental Quality Advisory Council (EQAC) and supported by the county's



Mariette is fourth from the left in the front row. Photo courtesy of the Fairfax County Office of Public Affairs.

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## Dirt Is Soil That Is in the Wrong Place

by Hana Newcomb

Everything I know about farming and soil and plants, I learned right here in this county, and mostly here on this piece of ground. I also learn from my longtime farming partner Ellen who has spent the last 30 years learning all she can about microbes and compost and the science of soil. She allows me to speak in non-technical terms, except for one important word – dirt. Ellen has taught me that dirt is what is on my clothes and under my nails and lively soil is what makes everything possible in our work.

But I have to say that we have some serious dirt here in the middle of our farm. It arrived this spring. I had been waiting for this dirt to arrive for years, and I was filled with joy when the bulldozers finally came and took the paved road away and brought in the replacement material. I knew that it would take a long time to wake up this transplanted matter, and it has been an amazing

lesson in seeing what homeowners all around us find in their yards.

All around us, just beyond our borders, fields have been scraped clean of topsoil, bulldozers have reshaped the topography and houses have been planted in tight formation. The topsoil goes away, who knows where. After the houses are finished, the landscapers roll out some sod on top of the smooth brown clay. They water it and fertilize it and the sod takes root. They plant beds of large bushes and plunk in some expensively big trees. Lots of fertilizer, lots of spray, lots of mulch. But if the homeowner wants to plant a garden, she is

in for a sad surprise. The ground under that lawn is hard and crunchy and red. There is nothing to power a vegetable plant.

This dirt that came to fill the space where the road was is that same crunchy stuff. They brought in 400 dump truck loads of reddish brownish clay, filled up the low spots, smoothed out the steep parts and made a pleasing new space. The bulldozer drove on it over and over so that it would stay put and not wash down into the stand.

This summer we spread compost, planted a cover crop, the cover crop grew about six inches before it could grow no more, I tilled it in, spread more compost, planted

a different cover crop. That one grew to about eight inches before it could go no further (the same seeds in one of our normal fields grew grass that was eight feet tall). Recently I just dumped big piles of compost all over these fields, hoping to finally wake it up.

You know your field is dead when the crows arrive to search for bugs and worms, poke around for less than a minute, and depart. Those crows are smart. They don't waste their time looking through dirt.

I knew that it would take a few years to change this from dirt to soil, and perhaps I was overly optimistic. But I predict that in two years we will be growing flowers on this ground because I am going to keep dumping in the organic matter until the soil comes alive. It will be a great day when these new fields grow a carpet of weeds, like the rest of our farm does. Then we will know the microbes have moved in and we can start growing some real food.



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environmental coordinator and the Department of Planning and Zoning. I decided to nominate the farm for the award. To summarize: “The manner in which PVF operates their business, the number of Fairfax County resident’s lives and health that benefit from their business, their educational outreach and the benefit that their open land brings

to the County is unparalleled.”

And the farm won. Mariette Newcomb accepted the award and got a big hug from EQAC Chairman Stella Koch, a personal friend, who was handling the awards ceremony. PVF was “Recognized for its continued dedication to sustainable “Ecoganic” farming practices, its innovation in supporting local farmers, its outreach and education activities and its commitment to retaining

an agricultural use in an otherwise developed area, including:

- The maintenance of soil rich in organic matter and beneficial microbes.
- Avoidance of use of commercial synthetic fertilizers or pesticides.
- Sustainable soil management and crop cultivation methods that PVF refers to as “Ecoganic.”

Congratulations to all. We all win, in this case.



# Notes From Behind the Stand: The First 100 Days

by David Smyth

Sept 5, 2013: PVF's first ever arugula cleaning accident in over 40 years. Guess who was involved. At the inquest, the injured party admitted to dozing off during the Arugula 101 Spinning lesson.

Good News: I am eligible to retire as the official Farm Elf. Bad news: I must first wait for Hiu, but she keeps changing her job description.

The restroom landscaping project is on hold due to unanticipated shortage of suitable of Feng Shui rocks dug up by the tractor. Apparently, Hana has a greater need for rocks to be dumped in a gully. Hmph.

First thoughts after arriving extra early at 9:45 a.m., to assist with the CSA deliveries was: "I wonder when dawn is. Everyone I asked kept assuring me with: "Soon"/"Nearly there"/"Won't be long". Turned out they were all a bunch of truth stretchers.

Apparently the golf carts run better when you use the choke – whatever, and wherever that is.

Plan to bronze the 10,000th onion that I clean.

While currently fluently bilingual, US/UK, I am hoping to add modest PVF language skills by the end of the 2013 growing season. However, right now it's still a case of two great nations separated by a common language.

"There are 99 green ponies waiting to be washed, waiting to be washed/I washed one, I washed one/ Now there're only 98 green ponies waiting to be washed". This self-confidence building ditty can also be sung to the tune of "Yankee Doodle", "Mr. Ed" and "The Pony Sleeps Tonight".

"Oh, David! Where are you? I have a small job for you" generally makes me duck under the table faster than Alice fell down the Rabbit hole.



Ginger growing in the cold frame.

Dread coming to work on Tuesdays. That's when everyone seems to dump onto my tiny 24 x 60 inch IN tray. Some of them think "A problem shared is a problem halved". (Ed. Note: We borrowed the IN tray for the pumpkin display, without asking. To offset the subsequent whining, we gave him a 24 x 72 tray so we could dump even more stuff on it).

I wish I had read Amelia G's newsletter item on her strength training frustrations sooner. My constantly asking her if she needed help with the heavy stuff must really have grated on her nerves.

Last week's orientation hay ride was great fun until I found out I would conducting future tours for the area school children. I must study my Cliffs Notes on plants that apparently grow outside of my immediate washing area.

You are welcome to check out our new ER, near the CSA room, for the farm's inevitable hoeing accidents.

Hana really looks forward to Sundays: her one David-free day

each week. For my part, I really miss being allowed to help her on Sundays, whether she needs it or not.

The current CSA area Lost and Found inventory includes a set of car keys, a child's left sandal, two small wooden blocks decorated with pictures of yummy vegetables. Anyone?

Apparently, color-blind males make excellent camouflage detectors. But, as to checking to see if PVF's tomatoes are ready for harvesting, not so much. Also, they still won't let me bunch flowers for the farmers' markets.

Screening only the best red, yellow, orange and rose cherry tomatoes for CSA and the stand becomes all the more interesting when one compares that job to a diamond grader's highly rewarding routine. However, trust, but verify, when employing a certain male to grade the farm's produce by color.

CSA members who get six eggs in their weekly shares are given a left- or right-handed egg carton

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# Notes from the Field

## A Good Breeze

By Michael Bradford

Farming is not usually very pleasant; it's often very hot, sticky, itchy, and painful. Often I have to drag my feet to do a job I really don't care for. But every so often I get out into the field in the morning when the dew is just about to evaporate away, the birds are singing just like I remember from my childhood, and there is a light breeze. I've often said that the whole point of farming is the breeze, and it's important to realize that you can't appreciate a breeze unless you've been sweating. When the breeze comes around I often stand up to get the full effect and take some time to look around and appreciate where I am and what I'm doing.

It was on such a morning last month that I stood up from the row of tomatoes I was picking and looked out at rolling hills of crops and pasture to enjoy the sublime beauty of farming. My brief scan of the vista was interrupted suddenly as a half-ripe but slightly rotten tomato flew through the air and

hit me just to the right of my throat, on my jugular. The sharp sting and dull pain like I was punched in the neck was followed quickly by a cackle from 100 feet away. I didn't have to look to know that my brother Stephen was to blame; this is a game I know quite well.

I should have known better than to expose myself like that in the tomato patch while Stephen was around. The rows of tomatoes are strung up to form a wall of vines, and natural trenches between rows. I've spent many summers scooting along desperately trying to keep my head below the top of the plants, to hide my position and protect me from the onslaught. Of course I am expected to fire back (and I often do), otherwise it's not as fun for Stephen, who has said these exact words after I've complained to him: "I would LOVE to get hit by a rotten tomato by my brother." Unfortunately I don't have nearly the strength or accuracy that my brother does, and all too often I return from a morning of picking smelling of rotten



The utterly unrepentant Stephen.

tomatoes, covered in red stains and light bruises while Stephen leaves with a big grin and a clean shirt. And yet he doesn't seem to understand why I don't like to play this game with him much anymore.

But when it comes down to it, I don't have the heart to deprive him of the pleasure. Throwing tomatoes at his younger brother is Stephen's version

of pausing to enjoy a breeze and a view. It's these moments that keep us sane and pass the time, and remind us of a childhood that didn't revolve around work, but rather the pure experience of nature and play. And I do have to admit that the challenge makes it all the more rewarding when I do manage to land a nice juicy, mostly rotten tomato right on his back.

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based on a formula. Curiously, by far the majority of the egg cartons subsequently returned for recycling are the left-handed

ones, really ruining one's egg carton sorting day. Based on an anonymous tip, I found of several of the right-handed ones currently offered for sale on eBay, entitled "Collector's Item".

I now must tuck both patches of ginger into bed every evening before I can go home. They need to feel like they are in Hawaii even while they are sleeping.