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*In this issue, we talk about the weather. We talk about the weather a lot in our line of work.*

### Working in All Weather

by Hana Newcomb

I have worked outside all my life, so I have hundreds of memories of working in extreme heat, driving rain, even picking tomatoes in the snow in October. But the most notable are the times when we have to change our plans, or step up our game in order to keep going. A few examples:

\*In the late 1960s, we protected tomato plants from a late frost by covering each plant with a "Hot Cap." Hot caps were made of wax paper, had minimal structure that made them into a paper hat with a little brim. This we covered with a metal cone, shoveling dirt over the top so it would secure the edges of the paper hat on the ground. This we did starting at 3 AM sometimes on a school night, with our parents.

\*In the spring, it is sometimes too wet to drive a tractor in the fields and we get desperate to plant seeds after a while. A few years ago the whole crew went out in the pouring rain, with little buckets of seeds that we protected with our raingear and our bodies, and we planted squash into the plastic mulch. By the end

of the session, our boots were filled with water but the seeds in our buckets were still dry, mostly.

\*One fall it rained so much for so long that it was never going to be dry enough to dig the sweet potatoes with the machine. So Stacey and Casey and the crew heroically dug all the sweet potatoes with a digging fork, in the mud, day after day. They could not even drive a truck on the gravel roads, they had to get to the fields with a tractor. It was a monumental effort, and they harvested every potato and sold them all.

\*Five years ago, when the derecho hit, we had no electricity on the farm for five steamy days. It was late June, the CSA was underway. Jon moved generators between the coolers and the freezers and our own houses for five days, keeping the vegetables cool and the meat frozen. We didn't miss a single delivery, even though we had to take the vegetables off the farm to wash them, as the wells are powered by electricity and the generators did not have enough umph to start the well pumps.



We are still building more tunnels so we can have spaces that can be dry when it's raining and warm when it's cool and the plants can have some protection from diseases.



The Purcellville stand, open to the elements, but on a clear day the breezes keep us happy.

### The Sound and The Fury of the Stand in a Rainstorm

by Jill Evans-Kavaldjian

Most days it's calm and peaceful up on the highest, northernmost ground of the farm in Purcellville. Stand workers get nice views of the rest of PVF West and the surrounding farms of Wheatland. The nearby mountains create a beautiful blue backdrop to the scene, making our work pleasant. However, this hilltop perch is totally exposed to the weather. We don't worry about flooding up there, but rainstorms sweep in from the west with high drama.

From the stand you can see the storm clouds as they cross Short Hill Mountain on their approach. Winds rip through the building, scattering all the signs and papers. Then the rain starts, and a pleasant rain-on-the-roof music begins. Part of the farmstand at PVF West is a repurposed

aluminum carport, camouflaged as a barn. It's a nice open, metal-roofed space where we set up our veggie displays. As the rain increases in intensity, we close the stand windows and doors to try to keep the wind-whipped water out, and the sound on the metal roof rises to a crescendo. Sometimes, customers wait out the storm in the stand, but the sound can be so loud that it's impossible to converse. The stand worker snaps into action, quickly moving vegetables away from the doors and windows to keep them dry, chasing flying signs and papers and egg boxes. Lightning and thunder add to the excitement.

The show is generally over in minutes. The stand workers catch their breath and put everything back in its place, and customers dash back through the slowing raindrops with bags of vegetables. All part of the package on our windy hilltop: beautiful views and crazy weather.

### Market Forecast: Fewer Customers When It's Miserable Out

by Vida Castro

Too much rain, heat, or cold, influences how we deal with farm maintenance or harvest days, but it was only last year that I really experienced its effect on market days. On one extremely cold day, we had vegetable popsicles by 8am, just from sitting on display, before market started! You could make it snow by waving a chard bunch around, the glittery ice dust, breaking off. I remember the popsicles soliciting absurd questions from customers. "Do you keep your vegetables in freezers?" "Did you pick these frozen?" Most vegetables can stand extremely hot temperatures for the duration of market, so long as they are in the shade, but below freezing temperatures are unforgiving.

It's difficult to rely on customer market attendance on freezing days, when your competition can be a warm bed indoors! Also, cold market days can feel worse than cold work days, because you don't move enough to thaw out frozen limbs. And, frozen fingers are difficult for handing out change. Our usually coveted shady spot became an annoyance, as we hopped and fidgeted for moments in the sunshine. Complaining to my coworker Philip about my frozen toes, distracting ourselves with conversation, and breaks to the warm bathrooms helped get me through the morning. Although miserable days make me appreciate beautiful ones, I've often been made aware of how farmers are slaves to the weather.





## Cement Floor – A Dream Come True

by Sarah Waybright

For many years, the food processing area in the back of the stand had a dirt floor. It was bumpy, dry, and a lot of dust gathered on feet and pants. So earlier this season, in an upgrade that we'll love for many years more, we got a fully cement floor. It called for a change of layout, getting rid of our big all-purpose table in favor of more space to maneuver and improvement of vegetable processing flow. We added a dedicated sink for hand washing, and extra sinks for veggie cleaning. It's easier to wheel carts over, sweep clean, and keep clean. And in weather like what we've been having - rain for days on end that has fully saturated everything - a floor that won't turn to mud is a highly appreciated feature. Pop your head back the next time you visit us, and admire this overlooked feature we now use every day!



## Sometimes There is a Double Rainbow

by Megan Seldon

During one of our first spells of rain, we were planning to have a party to celebrate Vida's birthday. It was the first event I was going to be at with some of the Vienna workers coming out to Loudoun, and it felt like most people at the farm were going to be there. I was excited to meet everyone. The weather had been steadily bad leading up to that Monday, and an hour before the party was supposed to start a tornado warning was issued. Vida, Rachel, and I hunkered down in our house wondering if we should go down to the flooded basement as Hana texted us to make sure we were safe. As the weather cleared up we all made our way to Sophia, Stephen, and Julia's house for the party and were excited to see a bright yellow sky, voluptuous clouds, and an extraordinary double rainbow. Everyone at the party gathered outside to enjoy how incredible it was and as more people showed up we'd ask "Did you see the rainbow?!"

## Excellent Weather for Onions

by Mariette Hiu Newcomb

The weather this season has been challenging and complicated. But, as luck would have it, the onions, leeks and garlic thrived in the spring rain and then the flash drought. And we got all those crops out of the ground before the monsoons came. Timing was everything. It all went just right.

We've been growing onions, garlic, scallions, and leeks for many years with varying success. Long ago, we started with onion sets in the spring. We bought these tiny onions by the 25 lb bag from our local Southern States Co-op and planted them by dropping them in furrows made by a tractor-drawn transplanter as we sat on the low-slung metal seats of the same machine we use for setting out tomato and pepper plants later in the spring. We also made furrows with a hoe and dribbled the sets in and covered them afterwards with a hoe.

Several years later, we bought plants from a company in the South that started seedlings by planting seed thickly into open ground. In late March, they would pull them up by the handful, bunch and put a rubber band around an uncounted, unsorted clump, and ship them in a large waxed cardboard box to us by April 1 when our ground was hopefully dry enough to work

up. Sometimes the ground would still be too wet when the shipped seedlings arrived and the bunches might start to dry out or rot before we could plant them. Onions grow best (get larger) when the days are getting longer, so we try to get them in as early as we can in April,

I learned about growing onions and leeks by seed in 1993 while on sabbatical at Heinz Thomet's biodynamic garden at Genesis Farm in northern New Jersey. Since then, I have started thousands of plants from tiny black seeds in several hundred plastic trays and have gotten good enough at it that this year we didn't buy any southern-grown onion seedlings. We still buy some leek plants because they take longer to grow and we have good luck with them. We start leeks in the greenhouse for later plantings that we grow for the fall and winter shares.

This spring, we had a lot of rain and the leeks and onions grew well, bolstered with fish and seaweed emulsion through the drip irrigation lines. Then we had those hot days in late spring and early summer, which were good for harvesting the mature onions in July. We had a bumper crop of onions to lay out in both the greenhouse here and the open barn in Loudoun to dry and cure.

We learned something new from Zach, the seasoned farmer who recently joined our team -- we planted onion sets in December,



We created drying racks that went seven layers high for the torpedo and Cipollini onions. As we laid out the 1st layer, we were so proud. By the 7th layer, even we were tired of onions.

protected with row covers over the winter, and they were ready for harvest in time for our earliest farmers' markets. They were gorgeous, even after that brutal January.

It has been our best allium season ever, which is exciting for all of us. There are plenty of years when we are disappointed by a harvest of half-rotten onions and leeks that are lost in the weeds for good. This time we all won.

## Weirder and Weirder

by Ciara Prencipe

As I write this, it's raining. In July. AGAIN. Thinking back on past summers, this one seems weirder and weirder, which poses a major challenge for growing vegetables. This year we've had all

the possibilities: too cold (in the winter), too hot (remember that week in early spring?), too dry (for a whole month), too rainy (the past week), and too cool (this summer in general). Not to mention the snowstorm in March, the golf ball-sized hailstorm in April, and what we've dubbed Virginia's

monsoon season late July. It's taken a real toll on the plants, and even, I suspect, on us farmers.

There's nothing I can do as a farmer to control the weather, as much as I'd like to. And it's not all bad - this July has been relatively cool, so we haven't been suffering in the sun like normal; but then again, it's a mental

burden worrying about the crops not getting enough sunshine and heat. As much as I think this season is going well, it's felt like a huge challenge to farm in this topsy turvy weather. As climate change worsens, I guess we'll just have more of this to contend with.