



Vol. 15 No. 1

June 1-5, 2014



POTOMAC VEGETABLE FARMS
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Words of Wisdom to Get You Through The Season

by Becky Durst

CSA season is here! Some of you are rubbing your palms together with glee imagining the possibilities. And some of you are a little anxious. It's hard to figure out how to manage all those vegetables, especially when you don't know what you're getting until the day before. How are you supposed to plan? How do you know what to tackle first? And what are they?

One of the biggest tips in dealing with your weekly haul is to read your In the Bag email. We tell you exactly what you're getting and the best ways to store, preserve, and use your bounty so that you don't have to figure it all out. We find recipes that are simple for weeknight cooking (and some that are more for weekends or dinner parties). We pass along ideas of what others have done with their piling mountain of beets, crisper overflowing with cabbage, or tomatoes that have overtaken their counter space.

If you have trouble keeping track of your In The Bags, try creating a filter in your inbox. We also have past years' In The

Bags on our website, <http://www.potomacvegetablefarms.com/csa/newsletters/>. They're an easy one-stop reference if you're feeling a little panicky. Don't forget to search the recipes while you're there!

You'll start to learn what vegetables to tackle first. The more delicate the leaves, the shorter the shelf life. Eat the softest tomatoes first. Roots will last a good long while. Items with roots and leaves last best with the leaves removed. Then learn the wonderful art of stir fries, frittatas, soups and roasted vegetables—all fairly quick and simple meals that will use up lots of your vegetable stash at once.

Some folks find it easiest to process their veggies for the

week as soon as they get them home. Wash their greens, scrub their roots, slice up peppers and cucumbers for recipes later in the week. Not only do you get the work done in one shot, but you start thinking about the vegetables and how they go together. It's a good moment for inspiration.

If you're sure you can't make it through 3 pounds of squash, freeze it. Each email will include information on preserving your veggies. Take advantage of this information and, instead of getting overwhelmed, get ready for the fall and winter ahead when you will be dreaming of farm-flavorful green beans and wishing for grated zucchini for your favorite muffins.

Remember that this is a community! If you have a great idea, send it to your host to share. Also send questions to your host; the answer might help everyone. Start conversations in your group! Who has always wanted to try canning? I bet someone in your group would help you learn. Send messages to the community at large through me. There is a world of inspiration and knowledge right here. Use it!



Notes From the Farmer's Messy Desk: Perspective

by Hana Newcomb

I have begun to pay attention to small businesses that have been around for a long time – of course my curiosity comes from our experience here: PVF is in its sixth decade and still going strong. I know that it is not actually possible to succeed in business without really trying. There must be common threads running through the stories of small businesses that go on for generations – usually this thread is family, or some hybrid of family. So this leads me to ponder why some family businesses succeed and why others fold up after a generation or two.

As I have no formal business training, I am unaware of what is already known and taught at business school. But what I have observed in my life travels (admittedly the map is limited since I have been in Fairfax County every summer for all of my 54 years) is that the long-lasting businesses have much in common, even if their products

are completely different.

These thoughts are unfinished, but so far I have: relationships, community, a good product. Or in other words, a consistent customer base, a good location, a product that is universally needed (plus a flexible business plan, excellent bookkeeping skills, and a healthy fear of debt). I would be glad to hear from others what else they think should be on the list.

If you are someone who likes shopping at one-of-a-kind stores, then you are the kind of customer who has kept us going for so long. When I was growing up

there weren't so many stores that were all the same as each other, so this wasn't a shopping value that needed to be consciously maintained. But by the time I started to have children, the world was a different place and it took more effort to buy things at unique establishments. Because I shopped with my children, I began to articulate to them the reasons that we tried to spend money at stores that were not in every town in the county or the state or the country or the world. At its most basic level, they needed to understand that our family business was one-of-a-kind and we needed to support other families like ours.

We have been fortunate to have a consistent customer base, even in a place that is known for its transient population. We have customers who have been coming to our stand for 45 years. And I am certain that the good citizens of Arlington County have spent as much money at Potomac Vegetable Farms over the years as the other good citizens of Fairfax



The PVF West crew. From left: first year workers Matt, Cass, Maida, farm manager Casey, 3rd generation farmer Stephen who also works at PVF East, first timers Brianne and Katherine, farm manager Stacey, longtime farmer Ellen. We are off to a great start.

and Loudoun County combined. There is something special about the people who live in Arlington, and I can't say what it is, but they are staunch supporters of our farm -- a longstanding community that appreciates high quality, locally produced food. We went to the opening day of the Arlington Farmers Market on a spring Saturday in 1980 and we have made that trip for 30 Saturdays a year ever since.

My parents were not prescient when they chose to start this farm in this part of Fairfax County. They were lucky. My grandparents had already settled in on their country place on Beulah Road, moving here from DC in 1948. They could not have known that this part of the county would turn out to be this kind of suburbia. When my parents first started growing sweet corn in McLean, they were renting ground from old dairy farmers. No one knew what was coming. But as we have all heard -- until it sounds like wisdom from the Torah -- it's "location, location, location." This location on Route 7 is not precisely ideal for farming, but it is great for marketing. We

are 8 minutes from our closest farmers market and 40 minutes from the farthest. We are on a major highway, an old turnpike that connects Winchester to Alexandria. Tens of thousands of people drive past our farm every day. By now we are so out of place that 99.9% of the people who pass our farm stand have no idea that there is an actual working farm right here, four miles west of Tysons Corner.

But of course, an excellent location and a supportive community are only two of the major ingredients in creating a business with longevity -- the business must produce a product that is wanted/needed, and one that can survive the inevitable twists and turns of technology, politics, the economy and the cool factor.

Vegetables will never go out of style. When my parents started farming, they decided to grow sweet corn and tomatoes. Over 50 years later, there has been upheaval all over the world, people carry computers in their pockets, and the politics of this area continue to evolve but

everyone still wants corn and tomatoes.

If we still grew sweet corn, people would buy it for sure. But over the years we have learned about the environmental and human costs of using chemicals, and we have made the transition to organic growing methods, so sweet corn is out but tomatoes are definitely in. Our menu options have expanded dramatically as we have learned to grow more crops and we have taught our customers to eat more than the basics supermarket offerings. Once you get your soil in reliably good shape and you know how to grow things, you can keep changing the product list indefinitely and quickly -- we're not building cars, we're planting beans or radishes or kohlrabi.

In future articles, we will talk about other factors that contribute to our staying power, as well as other topics that farmers like to ponder. This is the first of a series from the farmers' messy desks. You will find that farmers have a lot to say!

The PVF East crew in the middle of May. From left: 8 year veteran/manager Carrie, 2nd year Kay, brand new Valentina, 2nd generation farmer Hana, 2nd year Ciara, manager Becky, founding farmer Hiu. Not pictured: the support crew of Jon, Michael B, Michael L, David.



Notes from the Field

Notes from The Edges of the Farm: Vernal Ponds

by Casey Gustawarow

During the cold depths of this March, while we were babying along our first plants in the greenhouse waiting for the warmth to arrive, some the first signs of spring had already appeared. I am referring to the amazing amphibian life that inhabits vernal or ephemeral ponds in forested wetland areas. I have always been intrigued by the chorus of spring peepers behind our house but until now I had not taken the time to explore their habitat and learn about all of the other amazing creatures that call vernal ponds their temporary home. Thanks to Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy, I was able to discover these unique and threatened environments and find that we have a few intact biodiverse vernal ponds on our farm property in Purcellville.

Vernal or “spring” ponds are found in or near forested areas and are generally depressions which fill with rainwater starting in the fall and disappearing around June or July. These vernal ponds have “obligate” species which require the



ponds for at least part of their life cycle. Often these species reproduce and live their early days in the ponds and then live in the forest for the rest of their lives. Some examples are wood frogs and mole salamanders such as Spotted, Marbled and Jefferson Salamanders. There are also many other species that can make vernal ponds their home but do not necessarily require them such as snapping turtles, spring peepers, pickerel frogs, and water beetles just to name a few. But the reason these ponds are so important for the obligate species is that they are an environment that has no fish predators of their young (little tadpoles) since the ponds are not permanent.

So every spring during the first warmish days of late February or early March, the wood frogs

descend from the forest and start to make their clacking call and begin to reproduce. Then shortly after that on the first rainy warm night (above 40F) in March, the Big Night occurs. Spotted and Jefferson salamanders awake from their slumber underground and march to the same vernal ponds that they were born in. This is a very coordinated effort and on this particular night all along the eastern US seaboard, millions of salamanders and frogs are making this journey. So if you are ever driving on a rainy March night be aware of these little guys especially from 8 to 10 PM, when the peak migration occurs.

I think that this cycle of life is amazing and the opportunity to be able to watch it is certainly a delight. Unfortunately vernal ponds are a threatened ecosystem in

this region and something that most people, myself included before this spring, have never heard of. As rapid land development continues and more forested areas are destroyed, these ponds and their inhabitants are put in danger. While the ponds themselves are important for these creatures, the forest around the ponds is actually where they spend most of their lives. Even if forest is left intact, sometimes roads are laid in between the forest habitat and the ponds, making for very difficult and dangerous crossings for these slow moving little guys. So it is important that development interests take these habitats into account and treat them appropriately.

So next spring, even before the blossoms and wildflowers have begun, listen for the clacking of the wood frogs and peeping of the peepers, don some waterproof boots and go exploring. Once you have witnessed these wonderful little ecosystems, it will be difficult to imagine not wanting to work to treasure and protect them.

