Farm Notes

CSA Newsletter

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Potomac Vegetable Farms
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Under New Management

by Becky Crouse

That's right, PVF West is under new management. You say you had no idea? That's exactly how we planned it.

After 18 seasons managing the Loudoun farm, Ellen Polishuk has begun the transition away from day-to-day farm work and is developing a consulting and teaching business. She's still actively involved in PVF West, but is spending less time in the dirt and more time as a mentor to the new generation of management.

That new management is the team of Stacey Carlberg and Casey Gustawarow, who were successfully wooed and hired in late 2010. Both worked most recently together at The Farm at Sunnyside in Rappahannock County. They're quickly proving themselves to be excellent managers, workers, teachers and all around just really good folks. We are lucky to have them.

PHOTO BY BECKY CROUSE

I moved from the PVF West to PVF East this year. As PVF East absorbed much of PVF West's CSA load (got all that?) and the roadside stand needing a little extra love, it made sense for me to switch locations and focus on those things with an Easterly point of view. So if you're getting CSA emails from me, and not Hana, don't be alarmed. All is right with the world.

So what does this mean for you? Well… not much.

Bags brimming with glorious veggies will still be delivered to dropoff points; hosts will still send emails to their members, and the veggies will be the same variety and quality that everyone is used to. I will be the main point of contact for CSA shares that get delivered, so all you hosts will still get those happy, slightly nagging, weekly emails from Becky.

Farming is about fluidity. Rain comes or doesn't. It's hot early, it's cold too soon. Workers change from season to season. Seed to fruit to compost, it's all a cycle. We take what comes, make the best of it, wrap it in the support that is this big PVF community, and turn it into delicious food. You can count on that every season.

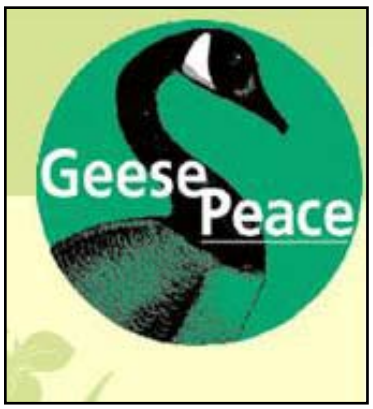

IMAGE COURTESY OF GEESEPEACE.ORG

Garden Pests: Geese

by Hana Newcomb

I chase geese out of the fields all winter long, just to keep them from adopting our open space as their permanent nesting ground. Lots of people say, "don't you like the free fertilizer?" This shows me how little people really understand about compost and other natural sources of nutrients. We would never feed our crops fresh poultry manure. Would anyone want us to let dogs run free all over our fields just for the fertilizer? I have my doubts.

A few years ago I went to a workshop on controlling the resident

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Notes from a Longtime CSA member

by Julie Segre

When I walk into the supermarket after the CSA ends in November, I start to drool looking at the enormous variety of produce. But as I reach for the asparagus, snap peas, and fennel, I start to think: 'Was this grown organically? Was this shipped 3,000 miles? Are the farmers receiving a decent price from the store?' And this is why every year I welcome the first delivery from Potomac Vegetable Farms. There are so many (often competing) decisions that we need to make as food consumers, and it's almost impossible to prioritize organic vs. locally sourced vs. small farm. But when I sign up with the PVF CSA, in one step, I've satisfied all of my central core values. Or rather, I've passed them on to Hana and Hiu and their myriad farm colleagues, who will now take care of my family for the next six months.

My sister-in-law Annie runs a fabulous CSA in the Northwest (http://www.helsingfarmcsa.com/). When I visit, I gorge myself on delicata squash, roasted fennel, and several pounds a day of cherries, raspberries or donut peaches, depending on the season. Through Annie I've come to understand a lot of the politics of running a CSA. From her website: 'CSAs give financial stability to the farm, which in turn enables the farm to commit to high quality produce at fair prices for you…. just farmers and people working together to sustain small farms and provide quality food.'

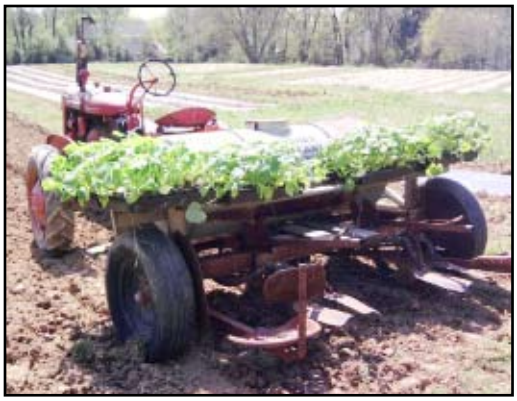

PHOTO BY BECKY CROUSE

Two unanticipated benefits. First, belonging to a CSA gives a sense of long-term commitment and responsibility between the consumer and the farmer. PVF is not going to take some short cut to growing the best produce. In return, I would never abandon them just because one year they had a bumper crop of tomatoes and no zucchini. The second unanticipated benefit is the sense of community the CSA imparts to my children who know exactly who's 'in' (i.e. who shows up to pick up their share Monday nights). Last fall, we had a family dinner with neighborhood friends who served ratatouille and potatoes. My daughter leaned over to me and said, 'It's just like what we had last night'. I love that since PVF delivers shares to our small neighborhood, there is a sense that we are all eating exactly the same food. When my daughter opened her hand-packed lunch at pre-school, it looked pretty much like other neighborhood kids. Eating organic, healthy, seasonal food, my kids just think that's normal.

I'm a biologist and I work on how bacterial communities are established and stabilized by diversity. My work investigates bacterial communities that live in your skin and how this is involved with common skin disorders like eczema. We surveyed peoples' underarms, foreheads, bend of the elbows, and bottoms of their feet. I would love to know what the 'normal' human microflora looked like 100 years ago before people started to take antibiotics. Similarly, I imagine the soil at PVF looks a lot more 'normal' than monocrop farms with pesticide dependence.

I'd join a CSA for the excellent quality produce or to support local farms – I'm lucky that I get both of those features concomitantly.

PHOTO BY BECKY CROUSE

"Geese" continued from Page 1

Canada goose population. This was the GeesePeace Population Stabilization Program. In the last ten years or so the population of resident Canada geese has been steadily increasing, and the geese are stomping and pooping all over lawns and pond areas and open spaces.

After taking this class I know a lot more about why they are here, how they reproduce, and why they are not likely to leave. Apparently they were brought to the Mid-Atlantic region to act as decoys 50 years ago when hunting geese was legal. One or two geese would paddle around in their pond, luring in huge flocks of migrating geese, and hunters would slay them by the hundreds. Now they are a protected species, and the decoy geese have established their own burgeoning flocks here. This is home to them. They migrate to Canada in the summer and then they return. It is a felony to kill them or eat their eggs.

The GeesePeace protocol is long and detailed and extremely homemade – basically, one "team member" uses an open umbrella as a distraction and shield, as s/he approaches the nest that is covered by a goose and protected by a gander. The umbrella-wielding person has one job only: to keep the geese away from the nest while the other team member does the oily deed. Team Member 2 has to juggle all the rest of the paraphernalia. Donning rubber gloves, the "egg coddler" fills a bucket with at least 6 inches of water, removes one egg from the nest (making sure it is warm) and then gives it the "float test." If it floats, s/he puts it back. If it sinks, then the next step is to dry it off with a paper towel and mark it with an X, using the magic marker. The gloved one dumps the tools out of the second bucket and pours in some oil. Then the egg is coated with corn oil. All the eggs get marked and coated with corn oil and left in the nest. Number 2 records the information on the clip board and a flag is dated and left 10 feet to the north of the nest.

The GeesePeace patrol needs to monitor the nest to be sure no new eggs are mixed in with the oily ones. Eggs breathe through their amazing shells, but not if they are slathered with oil. After a few weeks with no action from the eggs, the goose and gander will depart. It is a slow process, controlling a population, one nest at a time.

I was fully prepared to go out and smother eggs with corn oil, but I really did not want any geese to build a nest in the field – if I should happen to find eggs that floated (meaning they were already viable and the unborn geese were protected by law), I would have to let them hatch. And then those geese would be stuck inside the deer fence. Goslings can't fly for about four months. So these cute little puffballs would be marching around inside the fence with their two parents for all that time, waiting to be able to fly out. The advice of the trainer was to remove the fence. The trainer had a one track mind, and was not interested in deer issues.

Instead, I mounted a daily campaign of goose training. They said it couldn't be done, but I believe that geese can learn, if the teaching is consistent and simple. Every day I go over to the field and chase the geese away. I am teaching them there are more friendly places to pull up the grass, stomp around, sleep, and poop. After all that running and yelling over snowy fields (sometimes in nothing but my sweaty yoga clothes on my way home after class), they did not choose to make any nests in the field.

Farming anywhere is a fight with nature, and in this area we have our own unique battles. I won't say we are winning, but so far there are no resident geese who use our address for family reunions, and this small victory proves that with consistency and persistence you can teach geese simple lessons.

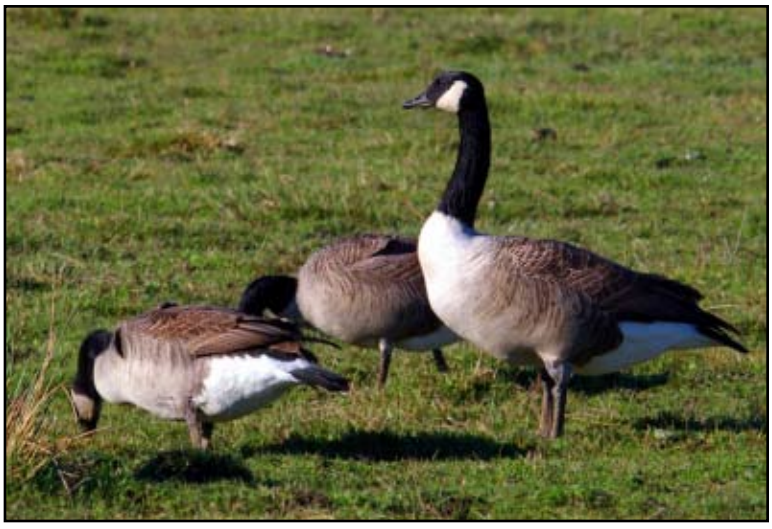

IMAGE COURTESY OF NATSCI.EDGEWOOD.COM

Notes from the Field

From Farm Worker to Farmer, and Back to Farm Worker

by David Giusti

Although this is my first year working for PVF, it's not the first time I've produced food for the CSA. Last season I farmed near the Loudoun PVF on land I rented from the Plancks at Wheatland Vegetable Farms. They had learned to farm from the Newcombs here at PVF in the 70s. I first entered the farm world in 2005 by chance, having no idea where it'd lead, just needing a summer job during my first year at Oberlin.

That first summer, I knew of the Vienna PVF as a somewhat-mythical farm existing only in stories from 30 years ago and at the Falls Church market. While learning tasks in the greenhouse we fledgling workers heard how Hiu or Tony Newcomb had once explained how to water-in seedlings; riding to market there was a whole hour to hear how the Plancks came to farm at PVF. Occasionally we heard about the reason they grew something a certain way, which was, "Because the Newcombs did it that way."

PHOTO BY BECKY CROUSE

David never wears a hardhat unless he's pounding posts.

Two years ago I returned to WVF to experience the entire season start to finish and felt the next step was to jump in and farm on my own. So last year I grew four acres of produce basically by copying what the Plancks did, mostly tomatoes and squash and lots of fall greens. I sold produce at the Del Ray and Annandale markets – and to PVF, which was super. Hana was excellent to work with, and it was wonderful to know that every bunch of greens I picked for her had already been sold and was headed to someone's kitchen.

Running a farm business was an incredible experience: an enormous, rewarding, semi-profitable project full of endlessly varied problems to solve and details to manage, resulting in beautiful tasty produce and happy eaters. But it took up all of my life, and in thinking about the coming year I realized I needed more time for things other than vegetables. So I came here. I moved into Blueberry Hill, behind PVF, to be a part of the community and to be nearer DC, and happily arranged to work at PVF part-time on an awesomely flexible schedule.

It's quite a contrast to move from directing workers on my own farm to being a worker on somebody else's. The fun parts are more fun, and the mundane work is more like work. I can enjoy each task without considering all the other projects still remaining to be done or wondering how my workers are doing.

This year my job is over when I walk home for the day, and I can turn to other pursuits like playing fiddle or recorder, pondering music theory, meeting with friends, going to contra dances, or directing a community early music chorus – and generally having a life outside of vegetables that wouldn't be possible with my own business out in Loudoun. The flexibility to work on the farm when I want and be off doing other things when I want is wonderful.

It's exciting to see PVF for real and to get to know the people here, after being tangentially connected to the farm and hearing names in stories. Even though I talked with Hana on the phone at least once a week last season about vegetable deliveries, I only saw her in person a few times! And it's certainly interesting to learn how the Newcombs solve the perennial farming problems and to compare their methods with what I've seen elsewhere. Clearly, no two farms are exactly alike and there is so much to learn no matter where you end up pounding tomato stakes or bunching greens. I am looking forward to all of it.