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

Our Stands are Open!

by Becky Crouse

PVF East and West opened our roadside stands on Friday. You can find an ever-growing assortment of goodies at both. There is, of course, beautiful ecoganic produce. Look for summer squash, chard, cabbage, onions, beets, garlic, cucumbers, basil, and green beans this week. Peppers and tomatoes are just around the corner. Because we know you have needs that we just can't fill, we'll also bring in berries, corn, peaches, and melons. Yum!

We have a selection of preserves as well as savory canned goods from McCutcheon's in Frederick, MD. Honey will be coming from Kelley's Apiaries. Both stands will continue to carry farm-fresh eggs.

PVF West's roadside stand will offer a variety of meats: chicken and pork from Haskins Family Farm in Middletown, VA, lamb from Willow Hawk Farm in Lovettsville, VA, and beef from Roxley Farms in Kearneysville, WV.

PVF East will still sell pies and bread from Mom's Apple Pie Company in Leesburg, VA and a variety of meats from EcoFriendly Foods, a farm cooperative servicing family farms in the Shenandoah Valley.

Both farms have been busy getting those stands gussied up for opening day. Be sure to notice PVF West's fresh coat of paint. You won't be able to help noticing PVF East's major renovations.

Stand Hours

PVF West

Tuesday through Sunday, 10am to 7pm
On the corner of Rte. 287 and John Wolford Road

PVF East

Tuesday through Friday, 10am to 6:30pm
Saturday and Sunday 9am to 6pm
9627 Leesburg Pike, just west of the intersection of Leesburg Pike and Beulah Road



(above) Michael Bradford and Hana Newcomb prepare to replace the old, weathered sign on top of the PVF East stand with a new one. (right) The state of the PVF East stand on June 30. Can you believe we opened the next day?



PHOTOS BY ALISSA GROISSER

To Weed or Not to Weed, That is the Question

by Ellen Polishuk

We spend a lot of time (and thus money) killing weeds around here. It's one of the 3 W's that our neighbors the Plancks have talked about for many years as the cornerstones of vegetable farming: Weeds, Water and Workers. I haven't ever kept track but I might venture that we spend maybe $\frac{1}{4}$ of our labor hours on weed management: actually pulling or hoeing weeds, laying and removing black plastic mulch, putting down hay/straw for mulch. For a business our size that translates into maybe \$40,000 in labor to fight weeds. And then there are capital costs for weed fighting machines (no new purchases lately), and the cost of making or obtaining mulch (\$15,000). We take this fight pretty seriously.

Why spend so much time and money fighting a bunch of plants? Basically, we are trying to grow our certain favorite plants, called vegetables, to feed our local community and make a living. Those favored plants are not always the most aggressive growers, or the most insect or disease resistant plants on the farm. They need our help to get growing and reap the results of our soil building practices. So, we must keep Mother Nature from growing her favorite crops (weeds) on the soil we've tilled. That's the fight.

Soil will not stay naked. That's a wonderful design feature of M. Nature. Weeds help keep soil from washing away into the streams and rivers. Those plants (weeds) begin the whole carbon cycle and work with the soil microbes to make the soil richer and more productive. It's what happens when we step out of the equation. And it works great.

But we want to eat beets, not ragweed or pigweed. So we must either cover that tilled soil with mulch, or spend time with steel and muscles killing the weeds that inevitably come. In sustainable agriculture, we have parted ways from our chemical farming friends in learning to accept a certain level of weediness. (Remember that those of us in the organic food business cannot employ the use of chemical herbicides!) Many a farmer is judged by her neighbors and colleagues by the amount of weeds in the field.

We are learning again and again just how many weeds each crop can tolerate and still make a decent yield. This magic amount of toleration is not



PHOTO BY ELLEN POLISHUK

quantifiable or found in any farmer's handbook. It's a decision that's made over and over again with each crop in each planting over time. We can divide crops into various categories that help us determine our weed control strategies: length of time in the field (radishes are a 28 day crop, celeriac is a 120 day crop), direct seeded vs. transplanted, and leaf canopy type (spindly like onions, or bushy like peppers).

I saw a wonderful example of using this matrix of categories to decide whether to spend money weeding a crop on the farm recently. Right next to each other are a bed of beets and a bed of turnips. They were direct seeded on the same day. Each had received one hand weeding at about 3 weeks. But, Casey and Stacey determined that the second weeding would only happen in the beet bed. Why? Because turnips are a shorter crop (35 days vs. 60 days) and are more aggressive growers. So, while the turnip beds look weedy and unkempt, they yielded perfectly nice turnips for market. The beets next door will wait another 3+ weeks before being harvested. If they hadn't been weeded the second time, the crop would have suffered enough to be economically damaging. So, we must continually ask ourselves, shall I weed or not? It's a very good question.

One Little Bottle of “RoundUp”

by Michael Bradford

“Stephen,” I said at a family dinner, placing my hand on his shoulder, “I need your help.”

“Of course you do, little brother,” he responded with a paternalistic look back at me. We smiled at each other and after a short time I clarified: “I need your help preserving the integrity of this farm. Are you willing to do this?” I knew what his answer would be, of course, and after receiving it I went on to explain more fully.

A few days prior I had been searching through our farm stand hoping to score some free honey that would have been stored over winter. What I found was much less sweet: a bottle of RoundUp sitting on a cabinet behind the stand. I became uneasy at the sight of this, and went straight up to Hana’s house to ask what the deal was.

The answer I received was what I expected: there was an uncontrollable weed problem on the border between our farm and the next door neighbors. The culprit was *ailanthus*, an invasive tree species with an extensive underground root system which can sprout new trees even when all of the trees have been cut down. The trees are next to the stand, and we’ve been fighting a losing battle with them since, I suppose, the farm’s beginning. Finally Hana asked an expert how to do this in the best ecologically friendly way, and the answer was RoundUp.

The trees are not close enough to any crops that an herbicide painted on the stumps would find its way to our produce, but I still felt uneasy about it. “I’m not OK with this,” I

told Hana. Her son Benjamin took my side immediately: “How am I supposed to explain our practices to our customers? ‘We don’t use pesticides or herbicides except when it’s convenient?’ Where does this end?”



PHOTO BY ALISSA GROISSER

When I explained the situation to Stephen, he turned to Hana and said almost exactly the same thing, and it was the same issue for me. I knew personally that this wouldn’t affect our crops and wouldn’t cause drastic environmental harm (it’s an invasive species after all), but I don’t know how I could face my customers every week at market and tell them about our farming practices with this in mind.

A couple of hours after I initially confronted Hana, she drove up to me in her golf cart. “I wanted to make sure that you understand that I agree with you,” she said. I said of course I understood that. She is, after all, the manager of aecoganic vegetable farm, and we come from the same place and the same family. We hold the same values.

The conflict which had occurred (if it could be called one) may best be phrased as a conflict between idealism and pragmatism, and this is most obvious because it fell along generational lines. Those of us in the younger generation have not had the experience of fighting for many frustrating years against something that won’t die, and we come at the problem with a fresh spirit.

Last week I tore down a deer fence and used a full bottle of Raid to kill about 10 wasp nests which had found a home there, successfully averting being stung many times. The irony of all of this was not lost on me, and though I could justify it all I wanted to — that it wasn’t really about the crops, it was about my own suffering, it was about the deer fence — in the end it’s all about the crops. Everything we do is a slippery slope that we try to navigate to the best of our ability, and that’s a promise I can take to my customers.

And the *ailanthus* trees? Well, instead of painting RoundUp on the stumps, Stephen and I are going to try a different method which was recommended by a few people: drilling a hole in the stump and putting salt in it. After we starve the big trees we will have to dig up the root system and keep close watch to make sure they don’t make a comeback. When you are picking up your vegetables you may still be able to see the bottle of RoundUp behind the stand, which I have covered with the words “DO NOT USE.” Better that it sit in the back of our stand as a reminder of our struggles than leach into a landfill somewhere.

Notes from the Field

There and Back Again: A Farmer's Tale

by Kate Powell

My journey of coming to PVF West has all the makings of an epic story, minus dragon slaying, three-headed dogs, etc. But it does span several continents and confront questions of identity, only to end up back at home, different than when I left in unexpected ways.

Growing up in Falls Church, I had long been aware of PVF. For several summers when I was younger, I had dutifully gone with my mom to our neighborhood CSA drop point to help her carry home our ubiquitous garlic scapes and other veggies.

At that time, and later in high school when some of my classmates were boys living and working at PVF, the idea of growing veggies held no interest for me. It seemed so distant from my life. I dreamed of adventure, maybe some fame in the form of an Oscar...you know.

The usual stuff. I never imagined when reading the newsletter that I would one day be writing in it.

Cue "epic adventure" montage: meeting awesome organic agriculture volunteers in New Zealand while traveling there; spending time on my college campus farm with friends; becoming increasingly concerned with issues of sustainability and peace in our global world; feeling challenged by issues of a sedentary lifestyle; struggling with an academic life of seeing and critiquing problems without the benefits of taking action; ending up on a crazy adventure to France where a lack of sufficient funds and a plane ticket home two months away lead to goat herding in the Pyrenees on an organic farm.

At this point the montage stops. I am sitting, alone, in a beautiful field, surrounded by goats that I wanted to kill moments ago while

chasing them out of the sunflower field, and I am laughing for the pure joy of being alive. Hmmm...

Returning to the States, I felt compelled to continue exploring organic agriculture. After being consistently on the move for about 5 years, I wanted to put down some roots. I also chose to be closer to my family and took an internship at a farm in Rappahannock County. My mom and I would frequent the Falls Church Farmer's Market and buy from PVF and it still never occurred to me to work there. But as fate would have it, I was working with Stacey and Casey who ultimately offered me a position with them when they moved to PVF West. My mom's response when I told her I would be working at PVF: "I might need to become a CSA member again!"

So what's in store for our narrator, now that her journey has brought her to PVF? I have no idea. Being a farmer is a lot of frickin' hard work and I don't know how long I will continue to want to do this. But I love being outdoors and I love the people I work with. I like feeling useful and healthy. I love eating our food! I feel so peaceful on my evening walks around the farm, enjoying the lightning bugs and the moon shining on greenhouse plastic or the remay protecting our crops. I'm grateful for all the lessons and skills I've learned — some only peripherally related to growing vegetables. Ultimately, where farming can be brutal as an occupation, it is so satisfying as a lifestyle choice.



IMAGE COURTESY OF KATE POWELL