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Greenhouse Time: Seasonal Whiplash

by Ashley See

Remember February? Chattering teeth. Crisp breath. And all things coming in twos: two pairs of pants; two sets of socks; two scarves wrapped around tightly...even two very rosy cheeks.

And now? Sunscreen and sweat tangoing down the brow. Gasps for breath. And all things barely coming in ones: one pair of sandals; one straw hat; one sad patch of shade beneath some sky-high weeds; one very green arm from harvesting tomatoes...even one dark, tanned stripe boldly marching across our backs.

Six months ago felt much different than any of my three previous seasons at PVF. I stepped into some large shoes as greenhouse manager in Loudoun for the first time. While I'd always worked in the greenhouse, I'd never been the one in charge of keeping everything alive—for not killing thousands of plants, which would translate into tons (literal tons) of food! Who was going to tell me if things looked sick? Which types of lettuce will do the best in the obscure patch by the deer fence as the temperatures oscillate? What's causing those mysterious spots and bites?

February also happens to mark when we sell the majority of our CSA shares. When you hear that hundreds of shares are already paid for, you cannot help but feel pressure. If I kill these plants, then what are we going to give all these hungry people?

So you tend. You carefully select each variety based on the temperatures it will be ready to harvest in. You sow each seed at just the right depth.



You water it with the rhythmic strokes of an impressionist. You meticulously watch for anything, for everything. You weed, you thin, you nurse. You worry about them when it's cold. You worry about them when it's hot. You check the propane. You go home. You come back and check that the heater is working. You go eat dinner. You forgot to make sure the doors were latched and barricaded shut with cinderblocks. And was there a bunny that may have run in as you shut the door? Better go check. You obsess over when it's the right time to introduce them to the real world. So you strategically put them outside, knowing they'll be planted in the field in two days.

And two days later, it hails. Or strong winds flip the flats on the ground, smashing their delicate little stems against the gravel. Or perhaps they get planted and then miss out on watering because an irrigation line blew. Flea beetles swarm and in the few days between planting and covering them with row cover, they're utterly massacred.

And it's then you realize that there's so much more that goes into one seed—one plant—than just you.

Fast-forward until now.

Handful by handful, with the same rhythm as I filled tomato pots with soil and weeded clover from trays of okra, I am now restocking globe-after-globe of Pink Beauty tomatoes at market—a seed I had touched six months and thousands of seeds ago.

Greenhouse time is seasonal whiplash.

How funny it seems that while most people are

continued on page 2

Thank You & Goodnight Virginia

by Hannah Smith

It's hot and rainy. It's cool and breezy. It's sunny and we are outside. Sun up to late afternoon. This summer I am living full time at the farm in Loudoun, in a POD, Personal Off-grid Dwelling. I walk outside for almost everything I do throughout the day. To go the kitchen, to use the bathroom, and to walk to work (a 4 minute stroll to the green barn). During the week I spend 70% of my time exposed to the elements. I have always been a gal that enjoyed the outdoors, from camping and hiking to back deck BBQ's. But most of my paid work has taken place inside, until this summer. I couldn't be more thrilled with it. To watch my body grow tan and muscular as the season progresses feels like a well earned badge of endurance. Every hour of tomato stringing in mid day heat is another notch under my belt. I have been learning about plant yields with every newly picked pony of squash carried out of the field. I have been learning about myself with every 5 am market call, rainy squash planting, and every morning bent over in the sun picking chard bunches. I get to watch the afternoon thunderstorms roll across the farm with whipping wind and pounding rain. At the end of the day the sweat, dirt, and

pollen has to be scrubbed off in the shower. I recount the tasks I have completed by the contents and color of the water running from my toes in our OUTDOOR SHOWER. Neon yellow means tomato picking, or stringing, daily talks at this point this summer. Brown is a given and indicates weeding, garlic harvesting, or continued plantings. Straw in the shower indicates that one of many long rows has been thoroughly mulched. My favorite is when our kitchen sink is stained pink from bunching beets! I relish this time to thank my body for putting up



with the challenges of the day and take account of abuses it has encountered. A sizable bruise, lavender in color, means a heavy crate of onions balanced too long on my thigh, a nearly healed blister on my thumb is from pulling scapes 2 weeks ago, a task that will not be missed. Band-aids on my thumbs and fingers are from our brand new harvest knives that are as seriously sharp as Cabot Cheddar. The tinge of sun-burn on my neck and cheeks is from the application of sunscreen that was forgotten after lunch. Soreness in my arms and legs can be fixed by a dedicated stretching session and Friday's Farm Yoga (thank you so much Hana). I proudly note my growing biceps. As the sun grows low I coat my hand with salve to protect my roughening skin. Gazing at the magnificent sunset framed by rolling Virginia hills I will eat my dinner on our picnic table, my rosy face cooled by a western breeze. Whether it's the weather or the dirt and bugs we have dealt with today I am happy that I got the chance to experience it. I am glad that I have worked hard amongst people I share common interests with, under the hot Virginia sun. As this sun bows below the scarlet painted mountains I am guided to my P.O.D. by the flicker of lightning bugs. Thank you and goodnight Virginia.

continued from page 1

sipping hot chocolate and shaking their fists at shoveling their porch, looking over a span of white and skeletal brown shrubs, I am bare-armed, sweating and surrounded by a sea of vibrant greens, purples and a rainbow of plant tags. Yet, when it's

beautifully lush outside those polycarbonate walls, I'm looking at an empty space with little more than some ground-dwelling weeds that drank up every run-off drop of what was.

Soon enough though, this space will start to hold the trophies of our season: bundles of garlic, pallets upon

pallets of drying onions, a panorama of pinks, beiges and blues of winter squash and stacks of sweet potatoes curing in the sweet summer sun.

So for now, I shall dismiss my seasonal confusion and just enjoy. I shall recount the lessons that greenhouse tending has enforced: no matter how times I obsessively

check little things like the propane levels or fret that I may have overwatered: it will work out; some things will live and some things will die, no matter how much I sing every so sweetly to them; and that working in a greenhouse in winter is a clever, clever way to trick yourself that you live in the tropics!

from girl on fire to farm strong

by Brianne Cook

Before I worked here, I was once a customer too. PVF has completely changed my life. I still remember how excited I was when I first moved to Leesburg and made the discovery there would be a farmers market in walking distance of me. I love veggies and I couldn't wait to have such immediate access to fresh produce.

Fast forward to two summers ago. While working a 9-5 office job I'd wander down to the market in Leesburg in my free time on Wednesday afternoon to browse the vendors. Without fail, I'd end up chatting with an adorable, friendly PVF worker whom we'll call 'Ashley'. She loved veggies just as much as I did! [maybe even more...] She had so much knowledge about cooking, storing, preparation! She introduced me to sweet potato greens! I was thrilled. Another connection discovered involving mutual love for a certain deep stretch yoga class and our instructor [tip of my straw hat to Billy—we love and miss you!] and a fast friendship was formed. I even got invited to a farm prom that fall to celebrate the end of the season. I remember walking in to the Moutoux barn, lights strung about and music playing, seeing all of the

farmers dancing and laughing and thinking 'This is where I want to be.' Alas, nothing in life is that simple or smooth but I was awestruck and determined.

Fast forward another 6 or 7 months to April 2014. Fueled by a need for change in my life and a passion for healthy living and veggies, I left my office job and packed my life up to move to PVF in Purcellville to work here! Sometimes life comes full circle like that.

Oh but wait, this was going to be a metaphor piece. About running. Farming. Physical and mental endurance. Small victories.

A friend once said to me, 'Long distance running is about the small victories.' What he said stuck with me. You see, I'm a runner. I'm not fast nor am I competitive with others. I run for a thousand reasons I can never fully express.

Girl on fire. One of my favorite nicknames and it comes from, you guessed it, running.

I'm a runner and I'm an encourager and I'm a celebrator of every small victory when I run. Huge hill coming up? Can't wait!

Come run with me and you'll see what I mean. I'll cheer you on and make you high five me after we tackle every hill.

Right, the metaphor... running for me is about the small victories. It's about every half mile adding up. It's about



Brianne (left) and Sam at the farmers' market.

every day when I lace up my shoes and head out the door.

And I've learned that, yes, as clichéd as it may sound [especially given the build up at this point] farming is similar to that mindset. Celebrating the small victories is what keeps farming enjoyable and keeps the hot days bearable. Looking down the long side of a freshly weeded bed with sweat dripping down my back makes me feel accomplished. Instant gratification. Starting seeds and watching them grow, victory. Transplanting and watching our veggies flower and grow baby veggies, victory. Finding your first ripening

tomato on the vine, huge victory! Getting the tarps set-up at market before it rains, gratitude-inducing victory. Mulching an entire bed of winter squash. Hell, mulching that first row! Harvesting all of the garlic together in one day. All of these tasks and accomplishments string together. Transplanting leads to mulching which leads to [hopefully less] weeding which leads to harvesting which leads to providing our lovely customers with veggies. Which is ultimately why we're all here.

And so I've learned that in the grand scheme of a farming season, it's truly the small victories that lead to big success.

Notes from the Field

The Egg Comes First, Unless You Get Your Chickens in the Mail

by Mariette Hiu Newcomb

Chickens and eggs have been a part of our farm ever since we moved to our present location on Route 7 in the mid-60's. In the early years when we were still living at Q Street in Washington and coming out to our rented land on Spring Hill Road on weekends, we didn't think about having animals in our mix.

Our first chickens came by way of Southern States Cooperative which used to have stores in Vienna, Herndon, and Leesburg. One-day old chicks came in the mail in shallow cardboard boxes with air holes from a hatchery somewhere in Pennsylvania or farther west. They traveled without water or food (we were told they didn't need either the first day



or so of their lives) and peeped loudly enough to scare the post office workers.

After a few years we decided to get 20-week old pullets, still through our farmer cooperative. Chicks cost less than a dollar each and take a lot of nurturing (and are so entertaining). Pullets that were already laying little eggs would cost

\$4 each. Today, with increased feed prices, we pay \$7.50.

We have built sturdy chicken houses for them with rough-cut poplar board and battens, with large screened windows that overlook the woods. The sixty brown hens are let out occasionally, protected by a movable electrified mesh fence from wily foxes who live nearby. Most of the time they putter around in a large house, eat organic non-GMO feed and left over greens, and lay three or four dozen a day in wooden box nests. We sell their eggs unrefrigerated at our stand.

Most of the eggs we sell at the stand and which you get in your weekly eggshares come from daughter Lani's chickens raised in the woods out

at our Loudoun farm. At first Lani experimented with raising the chickens out on pasture with her horses. When she noticed that they didn't like being out in the blazing sun, she moved them into the shade. At night they go into their houses, safe from predators.

Lani, who is an equine vet during the day, incubates eggs laid by her hens of various colors, raises and sells layers to backyard gardeners. She also brings retired layers and roosters to our Vienna stand for sale to anyone who wants to slaughter their own.

For those of you who want pasture-raised poultry but rather not kill and clean them yourselves, you can buy frozen roasters and chicken parts from our meat freezer at the stand. Chicken, pork, beef, sometimes rabbit, and specialized charcuterie come from small ranchers in the Shenandoah Valley and are processed by our friend Bev Eggleston/EcoFriendly Foods in central Virginia. All the meat is grass-fed and grown without hormones or antibiotics...and has superior flavor.

