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We've Reached Farm Tour Season

by Mariette Hiu Newcomb

October is the favorite month for teachers to bring their two to seven-year old children to visit our farm. Sometimes the school curriculum pays attention to the harvest season and Thanksgiving—even though most people, (young and old) are no longer connected to traditional agricultural activities.

The children hope to see farm animals like those in their picture books. We have three little pigs and friendly laying hens. Really, we hope to show them where the food in the supermarket comes from. We get them to smell and taste herbs and spinach, to pick and eat a few cherry tomatoes and green beans.

Because our main business is to grow vegetables in quantity for our markets and the CSA, and the crop rotations don't always happen with school tours in mind, by October there aren't a lot of recognizable vegetables to show them. The best time to show off those corn, tomatoes, zucchini, cucumbers, potatoes is in July, August, and September, not October.

High tunnels, greenhouse-like structures covered with plastic, are true season extenders. This year we planted a Three Sisters

Garden, a traditional American Indian companion planting of corn, beans, and squash/pumpkin in a hoop house. Majestic corn stalks with pole beans wrapped around them, surrounded by vigorous pumpkin vines still with bright yellow flowers and ripe winter squash. Alongside the Garden is one row of cherry tomatoes with end of season fruit they can pick. At the other end of the hoop house is a Bean Tunnel, pole beans growing on two rows of fence that meet in the space between them. Big people have to bend over but the children can scamper through the tunnel spotting beans still growing on the vines.

Occasionally, we have a high school environmental studies class interested in climate change and the part agriculture plays, both conventional and sustainable farms like ours. We also have culinary campers who are interested in learning about foods grown locally, buying and cooking them. Sometimes activists, planners, and foreign professionals come for tours because they want to see an example of a surviving family farm using organic/sustainable practices close into D.C.

Farm tours are a way for us to get people excited about eating real food, and that's what we like to do most of all.



Frequently Asked Questions, As a Vegan

by Helene Shore

As I address these FAQ's, perhaps I can dispel some myths about living a plant based lifestyle.

Why? About 30 years ago I decided to become a vegetarian for health reasons. I did a little research, no internet then, and found that a plant based diet was much healthier and a way to compensate for my family disposition to heart disease. As time went on I became a vegan and after more research it became clear that it was also much healthier for the planet. Animal agriculture contributes to more greenhouse gases than all forms of transportation combined, has caused deforestation of the rainforest etc.

What do you eat? Lots of delicious food. I am a foodie. I relish my pick up at the CSA. The sights and smells of all that fabulous fresh food. I eat veggies,

fruits, beans, grains, nuts, seeds, and of course chocolate. I eat hearty entrees, not just side dishes, and love to experiment with new dishes and cuisines. I eat and plan my meals around what is in season and supplement with grains and beans.

Where do I get my protein? I could spend several pages on

this one. To be succinct, I get my protein, and all I need, from plants. Beans, grains, and vegetables all contain protein.

Isn't it boring? Absolutely not. As a vegan, I probably eat more of a variety of dishes than most people on a Standard American Diet (SAD).

My plate is not centered on a piece of meat, a starch and a veg. It is a colorful variety of foods, changing seasonally, with many different cuisines from many different cultures. It has vibrant colors, textures and tastes.

After all these years, I am still experimenting with recipes and tasting and learning about new foods. The farm always has some new fruit or veg for me to try; Stinging nettles, Chinese mulberries, new varieties of kale and the list goes on and on.

After all these years of thriving on a plant based diet, I wonder, why aren't you a vegan?



PVF in Line with Other Virginia Farms

by Michael Lipsky

"Virginia Farmers Planting More Cotton and Peanuts," read the news release from the U.S. Department of Agriculture we received in July. This was interesting! Usually PVF is an outlier among farms in the state. We don't grow tobacco, hay, corn or soybeans, the state's top crops. We grow vegetables for direct sale to our customers.

But with cotton and peanuts, we were in line with newsworthy agricultural trends.

Granted, our contributions to these

achievements of Virginia farmers are modest. After a crop failure at the Vienna farm last year, when the plants were put in the ground too late to form their distinctive "bolls," Hiu this year is bringing along 20 cotton plants for the school tours season that began in October.

As for the peanuts, last year they were planted late and were not weeded in a timely way. The yield was small.

This year Hiu planted two varieties at the proper time, and watered and weeded them as they developed. This year the yield from

the 50 plants should be spectacular.

I calculate (roughly) that our cotton production has increased over last year by 400%, while the peanut crop has more than doubled, with the promise of increased yields. In contrast, cotton planting by Virginia farmers in general increased by only three percent, and peanut planting in Virginia is up by only about 20 percent. PVF is clearly a leader in expanding production.

None of the PVF cotton will be made into fabric. It will probably go home in the backpacks of four

and five year olds, one imagines to show their parents what cotton actually looks like when it's harvested. Some of the peanuts will leave the farm in a similar manner.

But most, if squirrels don't get to the peanuts first, we'll harvest after the tour season and roast for home and family distribution.

In terms of the farm's contribution to Virginia production, PVF's 15 pounds of peanuts in the shell last year contributed about one one hundred thousandth of the increase in the state's peanut crop. But who's counting?

The Creation Story Beneath Every Bush

by Michael Bradford

A couple weeks ago I was mowing a circle around two large trees, one sapling, 6 honeysuckle bushes, a thorn bush, and a tangle of many vines, including poison ivy. This particular collection of plants is typical at the edges of forests and fields, and each plays a

role in pushing mowers further and further back. For some reason that day I looked at this little patch of expanding nature and thought “what’s the story here?” So I got a reciprocating saw and string trimmer to begin a meticulous process of cutting and extracting the bushes and vines, followed by some heavier machinery

for the stumps of the bushes.

I quickly found a few very old logs beneath one of the trees, which explained the placement of the bushes. The tree above had a trunk sized branch cut off, no doubt it had fallen directly down and then was cut for firewood, with the largest pieces left behind because they were heavy and pretty close to where they would be stored anyway. As happens so often, logs turn into vines and bushes, expanding outward. This probably started 15 years ago.

I was about to move on from all of this brush-wrangling, satisfied that I had uncovered this little story and did my part to fight nature in the process, when something caught

my eye. A large rock, mostly buried, had been disturbed by one of the roots I pulled out with a small stump. The rock, weighing roughly 100 pounds, sat directly between the two trees, almost touching both, with only about 3 inches exposed when it was resting. I looked up at the trees, one of which was a full 50 feet tall.

As it turns out, the story of this little expanding circle of nature began a long time ago, with a rock. A rock that stuck out just enough that it couldn’t be mowed over. Waves of weeds, trees, vines, and logs, and here we are a half century later with me touching a large rock while looking straight up, perplexed by

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Michael suddenly decided to cut down the crepe myrtle, with only a golf cart to carry it away.

Sweet Potato Sorting

by Sarah Waybright

Sweet potatoes are the star of fall - they can go sweet to savory, have a long shelf life, and work in nearly any world cuisine, from curries to tacos. But I never knew their life cycle before working at the farm, and now I love them even more!

Sweet potato plants are grown from “bare roots” or “slips” - parts of a mature potato where the eyes have started to sprout. Popped into the ground in the spring, they’re harvested all at once in the fall. Then, they have to “cure” for at least 2 weeks for their sugars to develop, so we can’t sell them right after they’re picked!

We cure sweet potatoes in our greenhouse that’s covered with a reflective silver screen to reflect light - too hot, and the potatoes start to bake, and get soft and moldy! After they’re cured, we sort them by size - larger ones go to market, and medium sized get portioned out in our CSA. Since we grow 3-4 different varieties, there are not only orange, but also purple, reddish, and white. Sorting also helps us to cull out potatoes that don’t make the customer cut - if an animal took a few bites, or the digger gouged it during harvest, we put those aside for “home use” - which means family and workers can take them for their own cooking. What a perk!



I am Living with PPD

by Emma Knoke

It was a warm, sunny summer day like any other, but after spending a morning picking hundreds of fennel bulbs, I realized I had these weird, red scratches covering my arms and legs. I shrugged them off thinking about all the random cuts and bruises of unknown origin I had previously received from farmwork. However, instead of fading, some splotches developed blisters! As soon as my mom diagnosed me with poison ivy, I rushed to do the medicated scrub, not once, but three times, and frantically threw everything I had touched in the last five days into the wash. (I had never gotten poison ivy before, so this was the end of the world).

I was still feeling leprosy a few days later, when Carrie decided it was not poison ivy, but noncontagious Phytophotodermatitis (I've taken to calling this PPD for short). This condition is quite a mouthful, so let's break it down. Basically, when the juices of a group of plants in the Umbelliferae family (fennel, carrots, celeriac, etc)--"phyto"--mix with UV rays--"photo"--on the skin of a person--"derma"--it becomes an "itis", like mine. This only happens to some people, only at a certain time when the plant juices are most potent, and only over the usually small areas of skin that touch the plant (apparently most of my arms and legs were touching the plants). So, all of these very specific circumstances

convened on me (wrong place at the wrong time, much?).

As Carrie told me of my affliction, other seasoned workers chimed in with their own PPD stories, and I soon realized this vicious disease has touched the lives of pretty much everyone who has been here long enough--practically an epidemic! They told me they had tried it all, no medication worked (still tried David's shaving cream cure-all, no luck) and I would just have to wait the months it took to fade and hope it didn't scar too badly. On the one hand, I



Emma feeling enthusiastic about farm trousers.

was overjoyed that I hadn't been spreading poison ivy; on the other, I was distraught because it seemed these scary red lines were more permanent than I thought.

Desperate not to scare the children, I tried to avoid going out in public (the farm was an exception), but when I could not avoid going out, I wore the lightest, coolest pants I owned to maintain coverage at the least level of discomfort in the summer heat. (These included a pair of pinstripe business casual trousers I had never worn before, as well as a pair of flowy bohemian hippie pants, thoroughly confusing my friends with my eclectic wardrobe.)

But, after a while, the PPD had faded a little and I grew tired of wearing pants all the time and eventually, I stopped trying to cover up. Three months later, I have scars, but I barely notice or think about them, and definitely don't go so far as to try to cover them up (maybe they even give me some farming street cred?). I will say that I no longer wear shorts on the farm, after looking around and realizing that all the seasoned farmers covered their legs, and now having first-hand knowledge of one of the reasons why. Now, I exclusively wear "farm trousers", as Pam put it, for protection from whatever may be waiting in the fields. This is where I get my true farm cred, arriving at work dressed and ready for anything.

"Creation," continued from pg 3

the enormity of the story I've just read backward and destroyed most evidence of.

A few days ago I was trimming the weeds around a large cedar stump next to a field and I noticed something odd embedded in the base of the rotting wood. I

jostled it loose and it turned out to be a chunk of concrete that the tree had grown around.

If I ever start a religion the creation story would say that in the beginning

god was mowing his lawn and he kept on damaging his blades on a rock that was too big to move so he just mowed around it and that became life on earth.