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Open House, Open Skies by Becky Crouse

PVF East held our open house on Sunday, August 7. Thunderstorms kept attendance down to about 25 or 30 people, but we have to be honest, we were thrilled to have the rain. We had a lovely time with the families that came to meet us. There were two hayride tours, delicious snacks, tractors to be ogled by the little ones, and that nice feeling that comes with putting names to faces after months of email.

We had a nice soaking about a half hour before the open house was scheduled to start, but that didn't deter us. The hay on the wagon was nice and dry, and the kids especially enjoyed the rolling tour from our roadside stand out to our far fields, through the blackberry patch, and then back to the stand. The second ride for the super enthusiasts and latecomers took us around our hillside field, for a visit with the chickens, and then back to the stand. The sun shone down for our tourists, and the watermelon and other assorted yummys made everyone happy at the end.

Thank you so much to everyone who came out. It was wonderful to meet you or say hello again.

HELP WANTED in September and October

We need a few more willing workers to help out on the weekends and weekday evenings at our roadside stand on Leesburg Pike. If you have three or four hours to offer several times a month, please contact hana@potomacvegetablefarms.com.

Some requirements:

- You must be able to lift and carry about forty pounds for a small distance.
- You should like talking about cooking and eating vegetables.
- You should be someone who naturally stays busy even when no one is around.
- You should know something about our farm so you can answer questions intelligently.

If you would like to be part of this lively farm community, please get in touch!



PHOTOS BY BECKY CROUSE

Notes from the Chicken House

by Michael Lipsky

Dear Nicholas:

Your mom wrote to me yesterday that you and your sister would help feed and water the chickens and collect the eggs when I'm away from the farm next week. Mariette and I really appreciate it.

I discovered something in the chicken house yesterday that I thought you should know about. When I went to collect the eggs I found a black snake in one of the nest returned the snake was slithering away. If I had caught it I would have taken it down to the swamp far away from the chicken house. It may not come back, but it might.

You should know that black snakes—they are black, but that's also their name—are the farmer's friend, because they control rodents, particularly rats. If there is a rat colony on a farm the black snake will go into the tunnels and catch and eat the rats. Black snakes will not hurt the chickens, and they are not poisonous or dangerous to people, but they do eat eggs, which is why we want to remove the snake from the chicken house.

The farm has had black snakes in the chicken house since it has had a chicken house, but this is the first time in about seven years that I've seen one. I watched one day in amazement as a snake unhinged its jaw to swallow an egg that seemed bigger around than it was. I could see the outline of the egg in the snake as it travelled down the digestive system. Then,

suddenly, the bulge in the snake wasn't there, and I supposed that the egg had broken in the snake.

Shortly after that I made a noose out of bailer twine, looped it over the snake's head, yanked it out of the nest, threw it into a garbage can with a lid, and let it go down the hill from the farm. I didn't see it again that summer, and haven't seen one since.

When the farm was started almost 50 years ago, Route 7 was a two lane road in countryside populated by pastures and retired dairy farms. A snake in the chicken house is a reminder that we are not so far from those days. Even though we now live in the suburbs of a big city, and huge houses are being built all around us, we still have a snapping turtle that laid its eggs in the bean field, milkweed all around us to feed the Monarch butterflies on their incredible journey to Mexico, and fireflies twinkling at dark.

Because we live so close to the Difficult Run drainage, which can never be developed because it floods in a big rain, the farm, and Blueberry Hill, where you live, will always be visited by foxes, and deer, and other wildlife, like black snakes, with which we share space. I hope you agree this is a good thing.

Yours,
Michael

Note: Nicholas and his family live within easy walking distance of the chicken house and they have learned to take care of the chickens, sometimes for weeks at a time. We'll have to get their side of the story someday.



PHOTO BY JON GROISSER

Garden Pests: Bean Beetles

by Alissa Groisser and Hana Newcomb

Most of our growing practices focus on maintaining soil health. Crop rotation, composting, and cover crops are essential for keeping intensively cultivated soil in top condition. We work to stay one or two steps ahead of the weeds, bugs, bacteria, and viruses that are out to get our plants. Crop rotation can help prevent bacterial or insect infestations from getting too comfortable and growing in strength from one year to the next.

It is a constant, imperfect effort, and usually works well enough. Of course, we are but mortal humans who use no chemical pesticides and herbicides and sometimes we are unable to stay ahead of the tide – recently-developing challenges include the basil blight, stink bugs, blister beetles and intense heat. Even with healthy soil with lots of microbial life, we need more tools in our toolbox.

Mexican bean beetles are a longstanding challenge here. They return to our fields every year and multiply steadily. First there are just a few brown lady-bug look-alikes roaming around, then there are dime-sized collections of tiny yellow eggs under the bean leaves, then there are thousands of fuzzy yellow larvae meandering on the plants, and then there are immeasurable numbers of Mexican bean beetles flying around. By mid-season the bean leaves can be eaten down to brown lace, and the beans are scarred and twisted by the hordes of bean beetles



IMAGE COURTESY OF PHOTOBUCKET.COM/RODGERWINN

munching.

Once in a while, however, scientists and/or farmers come up with something fairly ingenious. Like parasitic wasps. The idea of purposefully releasing killer wasps into your bean patch may seem counterintuitive but the wasps are only interested in the bean beetle larvae and pose no threat to humans.

You may have seen one or two fuzzy yellow larvae still sitting on a green bean or on the underside of a stray leaf, after hitching a ride to the farmers market. In the 1970's, a team of scientists experimented with introducing several species of parasitic wasps native to India that help control the beetle populations of another beetle. The winning species, *Pediobius foveolatus*, was found to be extremely effective in reducing the amount of damage caused by Mexican bean beetles.

P. foveolatus is a black "mini-wasp" that grows to just 2.0-3.5 mm long and does not sting people or animals. Adult wasps can be ordered in the mail by the hundreds or thousands, and are over-nighted in small containers

that look like plastic portion cups with fine mesh lids. Within a few weeks of planting beans, we place these small containers on their sides among the plants, remove the lids, and give words of encouragement to the little troopers. The wasps emerge, locate bean beetle larvae, and deposit eggs into the yellow fuzzy bodies with their extended ovipositors. Within days, tiny wasp larvae hatch within the beetle larvae and begin feeding on their internal organs. The host gradually dies and turns brown. Just two weeks after the initial wasps are released, new adults emerge, mate, and are ready to attack again. They will remain in the bean patch for as long as bean beetle larvae are present – but they do not survive the winter. This means that new wasps must be ordered several times each summer, but it also means that the wasps are almost certainly not having a wider effect than intended.

We just saw in the Washington Post that there are researchers who are trying to find a similar biological solution to the growing stinkbug population. They haven't

Notes from the Field

Visiting the Farm = Working

by Jacob Sorokin

I am fifteen years old and I live in Denver, CO. I am the nephew of Jon Groisser and Hana Newcomb, and I recently visited the farm for a few days. I had a great time, and tasted a lot of great fruits and vegetables. Although I had been to the farm with my family before, I came alone this summer and I felt like I was really there for the first time. During this trip, I really got to (and by that I mean “had to”) work on the farm as one of the farmers, if only for a few days.

I was introduced to the horrors, and wonders, of being a real farmer, from the back-breaking lifting and hard work, to the fun of selling at the market. The market was probably my favorite part of the trip, in part because I got to work behind the counter, weighing vegetables and giving change back to customers. It was also interesting to see the “behind the scenes” look at the farm operations. The entire experience was exciting and I am looking forward to coming back next year!



PHOTO BY ANONYMOUS



IMAGE COURTESY OF GARDEN.ORG

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determined yet whether they would be introducing a whole new invasive species, but farmers are losing so many crops to stinkbugs that the agricultural researchers are tempted to risk it.

If it's not one thing, it's another. Humans have great intellectual advantages but bugs have only one task – to be fruitful and multiply and eat all of their favorite plants. The saga continues.

But Where Are the Beans, Then?

During that period of intense heat, when the nighttime temperatures didn't even get below about 75 or 80 degrees and the daytime highs were over 100 degrees, the blossoms on the bean plants just disappeared. One day there were loads of white blooms and promising little threads of baby beans, and suddenly they were gone. This has never happened before, in our memory. Extreme heat is very hard on blossoms, pollen, and the pollination process. The plants look vigorous, the leaves are fine, but there is no bean action. We have heard that there are no beans anywhere in the region, and this makes us feel only slightly better. At least we know this wasn't our doing.

We plant beans every two weeks, so this hiatus should end soon, if nothing else happens. We don't really know whether the *pediobus* wasps survived the heat, but the bean beetles are still alive and well.