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Our Biggest Building Project in 20 Years!!

by Ellen Polishuk

Once upon a time, Tony and Hiu bought a beautiful farm in Loudoun County. Somehow, the previous owners thought it wise to place the machine shed and cinderblock shop building close to the highway, but way way at the geographic lowest spot on the property. We've been struggling with having our farm center not in the center, and often in the mud ever since. In 2013, along comes the FSMA (Food Safety and Modernization Act) which is landmark legislation mandating new rules for farmers regarding food safety from the FDA (Food and Drug Administration). These rules are still being discussed and debated, but the near future holds absolutely new and fairly stringent guidelines on how produce is grown, harvested and handled post-harvest. The discussion of those rules is for another time, but the gist is that we had outgrown our current vegetable washing and packing area and the upcoming implementation of these new rules gave us the push we needed to begin planning for an updated and improved situation.

We pondered for over a year what we really needed, and where this wash/pack area should go. Believe me, we tried every which

way to figure out how to shoe horn a modern wash room into our old pole barn. We hired a consultant in late 2013 to help with the design and siting. We hired Chris Blanchard out of Iowa because he had experience building his own wash/pack building and had been keeping close touch with other growers and folks who had a good sense of what parts of the new FSMA rules would most likely make it through the discussion phase and eventually become law.

Chris came to visit us in mid February to see for himself what we had to work with, and to talk to our whole management team about how we do things and what our food safety issues might be. He wrote a wonderful report

outlining various choices of how to fit our wash/pack room into our existing barn, but he said clearly that he would highly recommend building a brand new building. We balked as we knew the price was higher than we imagined we wanted to afford. We hemmed and hawed and fussed, and finally Hana said she'd always wanted to get us out of the mud and so let's go ahead and build a new barn, price be darned.

Ahhh, so now we had to find a site on the farm proper, up on higher ground. In comes Mr. Broaddus, our favorite bulldozer man. He and I walked the farm to find a site that wouldn't require too much dirt moving,

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Notes from the Farmer's Messy Desk: The Challenges of Talking to Someone in Corporate

by David Giusti

A large chain of supermarkets recently began encouraging local farmers to sell to individual stores rather than the regional warehouse, so a small wholesale farmer like me can sell large volumes to a big corporation. I sell the vegetables from my tiny farm to Hana and others like her, but hope someday to become a slightly-less-small wholesale farmer. So I met with store managers, filled out paperwork, consulted my insurance company, filled out additional paperwork, and then re-filled out all the same forms after they were lost. After spending the better part of a year sending follow-up emails, I earned my place in the corporation's Regional Vendor System.

To my surprise this did not actually allow me to sell anything, which was disappointing since by now it was mid July and I had hundreds of pounds of squash waiting in the cooler. All it did was enable managers to purchase my produce, if they liked my cold-call spiel. But they did and were excited to buy it...as soon as I got a vendor number in their system. More emails. Next, I learned I needed to get each of my products added to each store's individual computer system, a task which, it became clear, each store's manager was not inclined to actually complete. More emails. My squash languishing in the cooler, I called upon Regional to straighten this out and add my products themselves, however irregular that would be.

Finally I was in the system, all that old squash had been donated to the food bank, and I was good to go! So I called up the stores asking to speak with managers I'd so promisingly met with. Without fail I was told to call back the next morning...sometimes several times. If I did reach the manager, maybe they needed to confer with their assistant, and call me back. Of course nobody calls back, so I followed up the next morning. This was consistently my experience at three different stores.

This was getting slightly annoying, so I called up a farmer who has been selling to these stores for the last four years. Perhaps there was some key to the system, some secret I hadn't learned. Perhaps I just needed to spend the time building stronger relationships with the buyers, as he had. Nope. His current experience was identical to my own. This is because time-strapped managers have the unenviable job of being caught in the middle of constant quotas, margins, and sales targets handed down from Regional. Unlike at an independent store, where the owner earns money directly through the sale of my vegetables (exactly as



I do), it is not in a manager's interest to care about my vegetables in particular.

I DO care about my vegetables in particular, and the whole experience was starting to feel a little soulless. Although I never know my end consumer, I'm used to selling wholesale to people with whom I have a personal relationship. At the unloading dock, however, the only person I saw was the receiver of the day. He didn't even look at what I brought, rarely even counting to make sure I dropped the right number of boxes.

One time I did get the manager to come check out my beautiful heirloom tomatoes. He grabbed a box. "These look fine, but my concern is they're too ripe and won't last," he said as he roughly dropped the box askew onto the stack. I wish I'd replied, "Well, they sure won't last if you handle them like THAT!"

We all lose out when the system is set up such that the people who work with producers do not care about the product, or who it came from. I was starting to think I should grow more-uniform, more-cucumber-shaped objects, and just more of them. I would sell more, and nobody at the store would

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that would drain well and might (please please) be near water and power. So, he went right to the highest spot on the farm that was flattish, and right next to the well and electric. It is in the absolute center of the property, and at a crossroads of two main farm roads. It seemed so BOLD to just plop a building right in the middle of everything, but Mr. Broaddus assured me it was the best spot. The rest of the PVF team agreed.

Several of us spent many hours with graph paper and little colored pieces of sticky notes that represented trucks, coolers and sinks, trying to figure out the floor plan. We decided on a 40x60 foot structure. Next came finding a builder. I really only interviewed two. Other ones didn't call back or such. I got a bid from a "regular" commercial metal building builder out of the Shenandoah Valley. And I got a bid from a Mennonite owned company out of Pennsylvania that specializes in building commercial poultry houses. The Mennonite man won the contest. Lawrence was polite, thoughtful and priced well. We accepted his bid in mid-June. As you can see by the timeline so far,

we were moving at a gentle pace.

Lawrence came back, in a truck with a hired driver, to help me think through every detail of our very crude design. He had great ideas and good questions. He said we were on the list and maybe the building would start in late August.

So, before the builders could come, I had Mr. Broaddus out to do the site work. You have to know that Mr. Broaddus (who is Kathy Broaddus's father, and Kathy is Lani's partner in Broad Run Vet Service) is about 80+ years old. But, he can run that track loader like nobody's business. First he pushed over the windbreak that Heinz and I planted in 1996, and proceeded to make a nice flat spot, big enough for the building and all the areas for trucks to come and go. This happened in late June.

Hurry up and wait.

It finally became our turn on the list and Cumberland Construction came out to begin construction on September 22nd. They started with string and levels to set the corners, and quickly the form of the building took shape. The roof trusses were set on the 30th. I took tons of photos, and

watched these very talented men move swiftly and confidently to create something from nothing. What a pleasure to see such skill displayed.

Next Warren and Brad Broy came out to bury all the pipes in the barn floor before the concrete got poured. After two consulting visits, Warren was glad to get to the work. Three trucks, 6 men, one backhoe and one tiny excavator descended on the site and did a full day's work to get everything finished before a big rain.

They poured the concrete floor the following week. Now we had a real building! A roof and a floor. Next comes bracing and trimming the doors and windows. Then comes siding. Now we have enough of a building for Hana's sister to get married in it on October 11th.

Tomorrow, it will all be done – at least the carpentry part. The men will have built interior walls, hung the ceiling, put in windows and door etc. I will miss their fine company. Such polite and sweet guys.

The next chapter is getting the water guys back to hook up the plumbing, and to get electricity to the building. Hana's husband Jon will do the internal plumbing and electrical work, with help from farm staff. Then the coolers need to get installed.

We hope to wash at least one vegetable for CSA before the end of the season. I'll keep you posted. I am very excited to see this project come to life. This building will change so much about how this farm works. It will become the new farm center – where we meet each other each morning, where we end each day, and where all our produce sleeps at night. We will be clean and tidy and food-safety compliant and absolutely more effective and efficient in our post-harvest handling.

I will be proud to show it to you at our next Open House.



Notes from the Field

Cover Crop: Extreme Make-over

by Hana Newcomb

We haven't even had a frost yet, but we have finally given up on the tomatoes. They just don't taste very interesting. At the Vienna farm, we mowed the last squash plants and the second to last bean patch. On both farms, the cover crop is growing fast. This year we have a mix of barley and radishes in a lot of the fields and everything is green and lush.

When Casey chooses which cover crop to plant in which patch (oats and vetch, barley, radishes, Austrian winter peas), he is thinking ahead to the crops that will go in next spring. The make-over before the next make-over. The ground that we need earliest will do best if the cover crop has died back over the winter, so the oats are good for onions and the first carrots. Yesterday we drove around the farm and he waved his

arm to the south: that will be good for brassicas in the spring – and to the north: this needs to be rested next year and to the west: this is some of our nicest soil, it works up so well.

It should not be surprising, after all these years, but I am still amazed at how quickly and completely the fields can change their look. One day there are rows of wooden stakes with dead, brown tomato vines dangling between the strings that held up the weight of those

formerly bushy green plants. A few days later the field is cleared of stakes and strings, the mower chews up the vines, the compost is spread, the spader churns up the soil, everything goes back to a smooth luscious brown. Then comes the grain drill, leaving its tidy parallel stripes. And then after about a week, the rows of radishes and barley are up.

I guess that's a lot of steps, with a lot of tractor operations, but still it seems so instantaneous

somehow. Those tomato vines filled our view for months and months, and suddenly the vista is wide open and the sky is huge again.

I can't think of many other work venues (other than a circus or a theater production) that have the same predictable, visual clearing of the slate. Certainly school years end and the building stands empty, or lawyers finish their briefs, but farmers get to clear their desks in a dramatic and final way, all the way to the horizon. We grind up all the residual biomass, stuff it back into the soil, and cover it all up with a pretty blanket.

When we have finished making the big green quilt of oats and barley and field radishes, then we are no longer needed out there until spring. We are excused. We go inside to warm up, make soup, and think non-farm thoughts.



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appreciate the difference – no, they would LIKE those varieties, because perfect-looking Platonic produce flies off the shelves, even without good flavor.

In the end, I was able to sell to the stores everything I had for them. Getting into the system and thinking I could deliver a lot of produce to those stores was not

at all a poor business move. It's clear that if I want to expand my acreage, and put up with organic certification (which, as even one of the certifying organizations put it, is purely a business decision, not an ecological one), I would have an eager if impersonal market for all I could grow.

However, I am a farmer first, not a businessman. I don't want to make more money growing lower

quality vegetables. The wholesale business model fits what I like about farming, and I want to pursue it as far as I can – without becoming lost in the wholesale cultural model of impersonal produce. I sure do want to grow more vegetables, but primarily for places that share the character I appreciate about PVF. Which is to say, I want to grow vegetables for people, not corporations.