



Vol. 15 No. 7

August 24-28, 2014



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

The Tangled Web We Weave Together

by Logan Buckley

This is my third summer working at PVF. As the summer starts looking towards fall, the crew here changes -- around this time people start heading back to college, and in a week or two the high schools will start and there will be even fewer people around. This will be my first experience of that; in past years I've ended around this time to go back to school myself, but since I graduated this year I get to see what the farm is like in the fall. I'm excited -- by all accounts fall on the farm is lovely -- but the coming fall has also gotten me thinking about how different each of my three summers here has been. There are some constants, of course -- it's the same farm, and I'm not an entirely different person -- but each year brings its own surprises, too.

On a basic level what I do at the farm has changed over time, with each season adding some tasks and activities and dropping off others. It feels like I've hardly touched the tomato plants this year -- compared to my first season, when about all I can remember is stringing and picking tomatoes -- but I've also spent much more time working with the PVF West crew in Loudon, doing a delivery for the CSA, and going to a new (for me) farmer's market in Takoma Park.

But I think more than the specific tasks, the feeling of the farm changes from year to year because of the other people involved -- beginning with the other workers and radiating outward. Each year brings new faces to the crew here for anything from a day to the whole season,

continued on page 4

CSA Open House on September 7

The annual PVF East CSA Open House Farm Tour will be held on Sunday, September 7 from 4pm-6pm. All CSA members are welcome! The farm tour includes a hay ride tour of the far reaches of the farm, a self-guided walking tour of the closer-in farm realm, and potluck snacks. You'll have a chance to see where many of your vegetables are grown, ask questions, and meet the PVF staff as well as fellow CSA members.

Please RSVP to Becky, becky@potomacvegetablefarms.com, if you plan to attend. We hope to see you there!



Notes from the Farmer's Messy Desk: August is the Cruellest Month, Usually

by Hana Newcomb

It's cruel, but so predictable. The crushing combination of the tomato crescendo and the steady exodus of the school-bound farm workers can be a morale drain, especially if you get a soggy heat wave at the same time. The workload peaks in August as we move mountains of vegetables from daybreak to dusk. This is the month that can make strong farmers weep.

I don't want to jinx anything, but it feels like we might get through August without any major meltdowns this time. Maybe the average age of our crew has increased enough that we no longer have drama? Are we too old to feel stress? There has been many an August with unexpected emotional explosions, sudden departures, and hard feelings. This year I don't even hear any rumblings. Perhaps I am getting hard of hearing in my old age.

Vegetable farmers far and wide have a love-hate relationship with August. It is a month of focused picking, sorting, packing, selling, distributing – the piles

of vegetables glow red, yellow, green, purple, orange, stacked in the coolers and shady places. Every week we stuff a few more baskets onto the market trucks, and we sell a little more each time. There is not a lot of variety from one day to the next: we wake up early, we pick, we pick some more, we wash and sort, we put round things into containers, we move the vegetables to their next home. Around the edges of the week the tractor drivers do some work, getting seeds in the ground for the fall crops, and we have brief bouts of planting, but August is all about picking and selling. And some farmers just hate that. There is not much call for visionary thinking. You just have to put your head down and look for the next zucchini.

Indoors, we can tell it is August because we have finally lost sight of the counter and the dining room table – covered with papers and newspapers and the detritus that comes with making schedules and putting together bank deposits. And this week we have started to can tomatoes because it is now or never. So there are two baskets

of ripe tomatoes on the floor, big pots on the stove, a bucket for pig food in the corner, and boxes of jars creating the mid- August ambience in our house.

Long ago a wise farmer from North Carolina said that you should never make any decisions about your farm during August. And we have taken that advice to heart. Even though there are plenty of long range topics that we could be discussing, we are taking a break from thinking about the big picture so we can focus on one day at a time.

And besides, at the Vienna farm we have to keep saying goodbye to workers, and that takes energy even though we don't have time to notice that. In the second half of August, every day is someone's last day, it seems. Today was Ciara's last day, and Amani's, and tomorrow they are off to college. Carson has one more day. And pretty soon the high school kids have to go back inside to learn geometry.

It is quite possible that this unseasonably beautiful weather has taken away most of the usual stress that comes with August. How can we feel burdened when we are enjoying breezes and beach temperatures while we pick beans? How can we mind that everyone else is at the beach while we are picking beans?

But there is one inevitable cruelty, every year at this time: the dark creeping in on both ends of the day. A few weeks ago, I could see the colors of the zinnias at 5:30 in the morning. Today I couldn't tell a pink tomato from a red one at 6:45. It should not come as a surprise, but it always feels like a loss. Daylight is precious and it is ebbing away.

Bring it on, September.



Serendipity

by Kate Oakley

PVF is a lot of things to me - it is my source of food, my home, our community, and my wife's place of work. It is the reason my house is always dirty, the reason we are so well fed, and the reason that Carrie's biceps are so big (ask her to flex, she wants you to!) Most importantly, it is the job that changed Carrie's career through what can only be called serendipity.

I moved to the DC area in the fall of 2006, knowing that my partner, Carrie, would be following me to the DC area a few months later. For both of us, it was an opportunity to start new careers: while I tried on the legal profession as a paralegal while I considered law school, Carrie left the job she had managing her family's feed and grain store in Saratoga, NY where she had been working since she was a little girl.

Leaving the family business was a big change. Other than while she was away at college, Carrie had worked in the family business all her life. Her family was expecting her to stay and eventually take over the running of the store, so our move to DC meant that Carrie wasn't just adjusting to a new city but also to a whole career.

Carrie had majored in business, but one only needs to meet her to know she'd hate a corner office. She didn't know what to do, what kind of work she wanted or what her experience set her up for. While she considered those questions, her first few months in the area - we were living in Pimmit Hills - were pretty quiet. I gently tried to nudge her toward one thing and another, but the right opportunity wasn't presenting itself.

Meanwhile, the hardest working person I know couldn't bear to



Kate on the left, Carrie on the right, on a rare moment off the farm.

be unemployed. Finally, one day I returned home from work to her excited question "guess what I did today?" I walked around the house, trying to figure out what was different, aware this was important to her, but to no avail. It turns out Carrie had spent her day scrubbing the bottoms of our pots and pans until they shone. It felt like a turning point, and I said to Carrie, "it is time for you to get a job".

Find a job she did. Carrie stumbled upon PVF as she was looking for a CSA for us to join. When she got to the farm, she asked Hana if she could volunteer since she needed something to do until she found a job. Soon enough, PVF became a paying gig.

PVF was and is a perfect fit for Carrie. She gets to work outside and play in the dirt all day for money, and she gets to do so in a small family business context that felt very comfortable to her. At Nemec's, some of the customers had known her since childhood, and leaving those relationships

was hard. But at PVF she started to get to know CSA members, farmer's market regulars, and the families who host CSA drop offs. Early mornings in Saratoga unloading tractor trailers of shavings and feed were replaced by equally early mornings in Falls Church setting up market, and over time the Newcombs started to feel a lot like family, too.

Carrie has been working at PVF since 2007, and we've been living on the farm in Vienna since 2009. A lot has happened in those intervening years - injury, loss, marriage, law school and the bar, three puppies, and a lot of metaphorical water under the bridge - but one of the most defining things about these years for both of us has been becoming a part of the farm. It is a pleasure watching the person you love flourish under a passion she never knew she had, and stumbling upon PVF couldn't have been a happier accident - even if that means the bottoms of our pots and pans are no longer quite so shiny.

Notes from the Field



After Friday Lunch, the group posed - - most of the people on the left side are cousins and Newcomb siblings, most of the people on the right are actual PVF employees. The lunch crowd is different every week.

continued from page 1

sometimes hailing from quite far off and always bringing with them interesting stories of their own to the farm. It seems to serve as a locus for connections between people, sometimes through tangled paths.

For example, I am part of a long tradition of PVF workers hailing from Oberlin College; though my family lives in the Alexandria area, I had to go off to Ohio to find out about it. Even then, I hadn't realized that I had a friend who'd grown up on a farm until we

ran into one another at Chip and Susan Planck's retirement celebration at Wheatland. I was only there because I'd decided more or less on a whim to spend the summer after my freshman year working at another farm in Prince William County -- the owner of that farm knew Chip and Susan tangentially through, I think, another farm connection. (Is that four degrees of separation? Had we not run into each other at that party (where I knew nobody else) I might never have ended up at PVF.

Now that my particular

journey has taken me to PVF, it's a pleasure to work backwards and hear other people's stories. From the people who grew up right next to (or on) the farm to the people who've traveled around the world to arrive here, everyone has their own particular connection to and relationship with the farm.

It makes for a good icebreaker, a tool which turns out to be useful surprisingly often in this kind of farm work. I meet someone new every week, not even counting the conversations I have

with customers old and new at farmer's markets, at the stand or picking up their CSA shares. And as each person shares their connection to the farm, I feel like I learn something about the farm as well as something about the person; each path is revealing in both directions. My idea of the farm at this point is a patchwork of stories I've heard from dozens of people, and this only in three short summers. I can only imagine the size of that quilt over the farm's whole half-century of history.