



Vol. 15 No. 2

June 15-19, 2014



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

Our Spader Turns 18 -- and Retires

by Ellen Polishuk

Alongtimeago,whenIwasbeing trained to be a Leubke compost maker, I had a chance to mix and mingle with my teacher and mentor, Uta Leubke from Austria. She kept referring (in German) to a tillage machine they used back home called a spading machine. I had barely heard of such a thing. She kept insisting that it was the gentlest and best tool with which to mix the soil. When I asked her if she thought I should buy one she said, "I wouldn't want to farm without one".

And so, we purchased this mythical machine from George Leidig who also sold us our compost turner. I believe it was \$16,000. That was back in 1995 or so. That was a lot of money then, and still is. But compared to what? Compared to a plow and disk or rototiller (the more usual tillage options), it was perhaps three times the purchase price. And, even more importantly to some growers, spading is very slow work. Running a disk behind a tractor is done sometimes in 3rd or 4th gear, whereas spading is done in low 1st gear. It's really slow

work. This drives many growers crazy. For me, it's a little trying, but spading is a good time to get some reflecting done. I always try to bring a paper and pen with me so I can keep track of all the good ideas I have while spading. For us, the gentle effectiveness of the spader way offsets the cost and speed of the operation.



The inner workings of the much-used, well-worn spader.

So, anyway, over the last two weeks or so, our aged spader has been moaning and groaning. The first stoppage occurred when the spader no longer turned at all. In order to assess the situation, a big metal chain case has to be removed. Inside that cover are sprockets and chains, all swimming in handfuls of pure grease! (Believe it or not, you can buy grease by the can full!) The problem this time was the sprocket was no longer connected to the shaft by a little metal "key", which had sheared. My sweetie Dan and I got the sprocket off, and assessed it. Dan is a mechanical engineer with "a real job", and he said that sprocket needed a new "keyway", as the old one was not crisp with 90 degree angles anymore, it was rounded. So, now I needed to find a few parts, and get the sprocket a new keyway. Winchester is where lots of real industrial work still happens out this way, so that's where I found a machine shop to fix the sprocket. All parts fixed and obtained, I successfully put it all back together in a couple hours. The worst part was cleaning all the grease out of the case, and

continued on page 3

Notes From the Farmer's Messy Desk: Succession, Longevity, Exit Strategies

by **Mariette Hiu Newcomb**

Last January, in the gorgeous setting of Esalen on the coast of Big Sur in California, a group of "Agrarian Elders" gathered for a week of talk, listening, and sharing of decades of farming experience. Long time small farmer and educators, Eliot Coleman from Maine and Michael Abelman from Vancouver decided to convene this small group of 23 people mostly in their sixties and older, while they were still actively involved in organic and sustainable farming.. I was the oldest as was our farm.

We came from many parts of North America, including a farmer from Nova Scotia, several from the upper Northeast, the mid-Atlantic coast, the Southwest, the Midwest and of course many who farmed in California and the West Coast. Our operations ranged from small and medium family-sized vegetable farms like ours to large producers who wholesaled to supermarkets. Dairy farmers who specialized in yogurt and cheese, farmers who raised animals for meat in addition to vegetables and orchards, people who had CSAs with several

hundred members, and a couple of organic seed growers, all with stories and concerns to share.

Given the limited time we had together, in ten or fifteen minutes each we described what we had been doing and why we were still at it. That was hard because there was so much accumulated experience in that room. Every day after a couple of hours of these "bios", we then talked about issues that were common to all of us. Interestingly, there was less talk about production and how to grow crops, topics that dominate agricultural conferences and workshops.

We wanted to know more about what had worked and what were still problematic.

What did we think about organic certification and whether big industrial agriculture was "taking over" and watering down principles of sustainability in order to capture the organic market?

How are we responding to the threat of "crop contamination" by genetically modified organisms (GMOs)?

Perhaps the most perplexing problem many of us are all

facing was how our businesses would survive our passing on or retirement. Not only do we need to bring on a new generation of farmers who share our knowledge and passion for growing good wholesome food, what are we doing to conserve and preserve land for agriculture now and into the future.

A couple of us are well positioned to have our farms continue. We both have families and people who are actively involved and committed. Full Belly Farm in the Capay Valley area near Sacramento has a large farm of orchards, vegetables, sheep, and a 1500-member CSA. The adult children after graduating college returned to create enterprises of their own within the larger farm. A sizeable crew of once migrant workers work year 'round.

Other farms struggle if their children do not stay on or if their loyal migrant workers are not deemed capable yet of running the business. The future of their now vibrant and successful businesses is uncertain.

Overall, this group of active elders is optimistic about the young people who work on our farms. There are more intentional mentoring programs and continuing education through conferences and workshops than there were fifty years ago. But it still takes many seasons of working and learning to maintain a viable farm. We need to continue to actively mentor our workers and potential farmers and promote policies, governmental and community-based, to save land for food production.



Mariette Hiu Newcomb, standing second from left, with the Agrarian Elders, some of the active pioneers of sustainable agriculture.

continued from page 1

scraping off the old gasket (the sealer between the case and the machine) so that I could apply a new liquid gasket to seal it all up. I used a lot of newspaper and paper towels and plastic gloves.

Once it was repaired, we got lots of spading done that day, until late that afternoon, I smelled something bad. I looked back and saw smoke coming from another part of the spader. It was an area that had indicated it was unhappy recently (some clunking noises and some parts looking off-kilter.... I just greased them real well and hoped for the best). This time it was really broken. Back down to the shop for repair. Same deal with removing a chain case, but now on the other side of the machine. Lots of grease again. But this time, I needed to get the bearing out. That required deeper surgery and a consult with Dan by phone and email. With good coaching, the old bearing was out, and more damaged parts discovered.

And so, after looking around and finding more broken things, time to take off yet another sprocket, to repair yet another bearing. The usual methods did not work. I bent a fairly hefty gear puller. Dan came over Saturday to help me wrangle it. We spent a few hours on the project to no avail – including borrowing a bigger heftier gear puller from our local tractor dealer (Browning Equipment, which is pretty awesome when you think about it. Can you imagine going to your car mechanic and borrowing a tool so you can fix your car at home? This is one of the small blessings of this farming business – people helping each other out,



Our new spader arrived. Isn't it gorgeous?

even businesses), and driving the rig over to Rob Moutoux's so we could use his acetylene torch to apply LOTS OF HEAT. (Again, how cool is that?) The thing just did not budge.

I called in yet another local mechanic who said he would cut it off with a torch – thereby adding maybe \$300 to the repair bill to replace the sprocket... but mostly he took a look around and said he thought our problems were deeper and more serious than bearings and sprockets. He said maybe the gear box was broken. Yikes. That's like hearing you need a new transmission in your car. BAD NEWS.

Monday I talked to George the spader dealer. He told me he just couldn't quite say what was wrong and how much it might cost to fix without taking it apart. He estimated that without the gear box being replaced a decent overhaul would be around \$5000 just in parts. If I wanted to do it quickly it would be more expensive as some parts would need to air freight from Holland. He suggested that we buy a new spading machine, and then figure

out what to do with the old one under less time pressure. I talked it all through with Hana and we decided to buy the new one.

Tomorrow George will deliver a \$20,000 spading machine, made in Holland. It is 500 pounds lighter, and goes a little bit faster than our old one. Now, farming will not be compromised by using inferior tillage tools (plow and disk). After making that decision, I headed back down for another round with the grease – this time to help answer the question of what to do with this machine. I took the top off the gear box so that tomorrow George can look at the guts of this machine and tell me whether I should overhaul it or permanently retire it.

As I told Stacey yesterday while I was wrenching away, I would never have been this mechanically adventurous if I was still the farm manager – I would not have had the time or inclination. I've mostly really enjoyed this process of working with my hands, my head, my man, and my neighbors to get the most out of an expensive and crucial farming implement.

Notes from the Field

I Think Therefore I am Hungry

By Maida Ives

I did not have a garden growing up, but I have always had a healthy appetite. Therefore, I should not be surprised that I relish working on a farm. But I am surprised, perpetually amazed by the system that I am a part of and have the privilege of working within.

This system (The field I am looking at? The Wheatland neighborhood? The food system?), like an abstract expressionist painting, changes form as I change my perspective. There are a multitude of components working together as a whole. There is sunlight, soil, water and wind; there are tractors, irrigation lines and row cover; there is the greenhouse, wash station, walk-in cooler; there are the owners, workers, CSA members.

Every day we edit our canvas. The tractor work comprises most of the sweeping brush strokes that change the face of the farm, tilling a new field or transplanting four thousand sweet potato slips. Our hands

make the small edits—thinning a bed of beets or spotting pepper plants in the greenhouse.

I am surprised again, by the beauty of a field of mulched tomatoes. My appreciation of the work changes form as I change my perspective. While mulching, I am spurred on by pace of the crew and the red-winged blackbirds' song. Then we are finished with the big job and standing upright again. I can already appreciate how beautiful it will be to not have to weed those rows

of tomatoes during their months of production. Then I am surprised yet again, to be driving the tractor as we transplant the next generation of tomatoes.

I am not the first farmer to talk about the painting of the landscape (thank you Gene Logsdon). Nor am I the first to write in this very newsletter about the mulching of fields or my personal journey to PVF (thank you Rebecca, Ashley, Clem). I don't think they mind much, because farmers are very generous. We

share greenhouse space, plant starts, growing techniques, and farmers share workers too.

How did I get to Potomac Vegetable Farms? I just moved across the field from Moutoux Orchard where I spent the winter milking cows for their full-diet CSA. How did I get there? I moved twenty minutes down the road from Mountain View Farm, my first full season of vegetable production and livestock care. I have been drawn to each farm by the warmth of spirit and breadth of knowledge that the owners and managers offer.

I came into farming because two things I love about life are a solid meal and an honest day's work. I thought to myself, why not have the one sustain the other? So I should not be surprised that I am here at PVF. I am a former math teacher taking attendance in the greenhouse, a rugby player racing down a field in the heat of the day. I am a person with an appetite for great produce; aren't you? Let's enjoy the masterpiece.

