# Farm Notes

## CSA Newsletter

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Potomac Vegetable Farms
www.potomacvegetablefarms.com
(703) 759-2119 ... Vienna
(540) 882-3885 ... Purcellville


# Cedar Street Girls at Camp Hana

by Christi Zaleski

A question had been hanging in the air since we planned our trip in February: would there be enough beds? It's a lot to ask for when you travel in a posse of four, particularly at the Newcomb/Groisser residence where the coming of summer transforms the house into Camp Hana. (Of course, she doesn't call it that – the name is our own affectionate invention.) At Camp Hana, old family friends from far and wide send their children to experience the joys of living and working on a farm in the shadow of our nation's capital. It's complete with authentic local food (that you pick) and activities (again, the picking). This was our second summer at Camp Hana, so we weren't worried that sleeping on the floor would be any impediment to the fun, but we were happy to learn that Hana's sister could host us, all in beds.

Until recently, we all lived together on Cedar Street in Somerville, MA – "we" being the three roommates of Alissa, Hana's middle child. Helene is from Rhode Island and works for Education First, running language immersion programs around the world; Christi is from Chicago and is studying law, with an interest in environmental law, negotiation/mediation, refugee rights, and lemon bars; and Abby is from Seattle and works as an Administrative Assistant at Brigham and Women's Hospital – maybe just because the bike commute is so beautiful? When Alissa got into medical school in February we planned the July trip as a last hurrah before losing Alissa for good to the books and cadavers. For the last two years, Hana had been supplying our house with an endless supply of eggs, and we, in turn, saved every egg carton that passed through our house to send back. Last year we discovered for the first time where our eggs came from when we visited the Newcomb/Groissers and spent a weekend on the farm. This summer, we planned to repeat our ritual and double down on quality time. Since then, Alissa decided to attend Harvard Med School so we are no longer losing her, and our last hurrah became something less bittersweet and more sweet sweet.

So what is a sweet-sweet weekend like at Camp Hana? It's actually sweet for one thing. The first night we arrived we celebrated a birthday with Funfetti Carrot Cake – which is really just regular carrot cake made with multicolored PVF carrots so that it looks like multicolored sprinkles on the inside but tastes like heaven.

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# Notes from the Farmer's Messy Desk: Blight

by Hana Newcomb

On July 22, we got the news: we are the first farm in the Commonwealth of Virginia with a confirmed case of late blight in our tomatoes. But this is just because we called the extension agent as soon as we saw the telltale signs on the leaves of our earliest patch of tomatoes – which brought an icy dread to our hearts. As it turned out, we inherited it from our neighbors just to the west and all the tomato growing farms on the Wheatland property are similarly afflicted. The tomatoes are dying of the same disease that created the great potato famine in Ireland.

Luckily none of us depends on tomatoes for our main source of nutrition.

But all these farms depend on tomatoes as an important source of income, and to fill our canning jars for the winter. Last year the blight arrived later in the season, but this summer has been so cool and dewy and delicious that the blight got an early start. If we had a few days over a hundred degrees, the blight would be toast. But instead we are living in an unusual pattern of lovely beach weather; it is definitely a mixed blessing.

This raises all sorts of questions for those of us who farm without chemical fungicides. Will we be able to grow any tomatoes that taste good in the future? The heirlooms can't handle blight. The Green Zebras went down without a fight. Some of the Cherokee Purples are hanging in there, but most of them are covered with nasty grey lesions. We are growing some blight- resistant hybrids. It is hard for us to tell if they taste sort of blah because it has been cold and damp or because they are a variety with inferior flavor.

It raises big questions for organic farmers large and small. Late blight brings a huge financial hit. Growing tomatoes is usually profitable but there are a lot of pre-harvest activities: growing the plants, planting them, mulching, staking, stringing (repeatedly). And now Casey is fighting the blight with copper, which is the recommended response for organic growers. But this is time-consuming and expensive and only partly effective. How much should we spend on growing tomatoes that only produce for a few weeks? We have heard from others who spent lots of money fighting blight that they would not do that again. They say to give up.

We are not ready to give up on growing tomatoes but this will be one of our big topics at our End of Season planning meetings.

In the meantime, we are planting unusually long rows of carrots and beets for the fall. It's not the same as tomatoes but everyone loves delicious root crops when that season rolls around, and we will be relieved (frankly) to be finished with all these prematurely grey plants. Stephen says picking in a blighted field is like "picking through an eternal field of blackened vines and every blighted fruit you pick bears the face of a loved one wailing in agony."

That's kind of dramatic. But do savor every juicy bite this summer.

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We continued the eating theme the next day at PVF West. Although we had big plans to gather some blueberries and spend the day hiking a mountain, we picked one gallon and proceeded to eat the entire bucket full while lying on a hammock and talking about how we wish we could ride the horses next door. Like everything else at Camp Hana, it's how city girls imagine life in the country. That night Alissa made a pie with more blueberries we picked, which we were somehow not sick of.

Sunday also revolved around food in a different way. We represented PVF at the Takoma Park Farmer's Market, trying, sometimes in vain, to remember our high school math to make sure that customers got the right change, and fueled by pint after pint of juicy Juliet tomatoes. Before we knew it the market was over and it was time to cook and eat again! This time fresh baked bread made with organic local flour grown by Heinz at Next Step Produce, baba ganoush, roasted vegetables, black bean burgers, and a peach cobbler for dessert.

If this were a real camp, it would definitely win the prize for the best camp food ever.

# Little Shop of Horrors

by Deb Werrlein

I've been a member of PVF for 11 years, and a pick up location for 9 of them. During my first few seasons, I think I was like many new members: I knew well enough what to do with a cucumber, but I'd never before eaten, let alone cooked, some of the other things coming home in my bag.

It never occurred to me not to try them, however. As my mother taaught me, always eat the food that's put in front of you. She felt that if someone made the effort to prepare a meal for you, you should honor that effort by eating the meal. Period. (I don't know, maybe a food allergy would have swayed her).

When I started shopping at farmers' markets and then found this CSA, it wasn't much of a leap for me to transfer my mother's sentiments to farming. I felt, if someone took the trouble to grow vegetables for purchase and consumption (and I purchased them), I should eat them. It's an old and accepted adage: don't waste food. It applies to grocery store food as well, but I think we all feel the obligation more keenly when we purchase food from farmers within our own community.

And so begins the joy and guilt of belonging to a CSA. I know you've all felt it: the day you got that beautiful bunch of cilantro (joy), the day you discovered the puddle that used to be cilantro, forgotten in the back of your vegetable drawer (guilt).

So I learned how to prepare and eat (and love!) collards and all the other vegetables coming home in my bag.

Then I became one of the pick-up locations for PVF. With that, I had to manage forgotten bags of vegetables on top of my own share. Mostly, people remember their food, but towards the end of each season, members can get weary. During these times, things like greens, zucchini and eggplant would backlog in my fridge. Still, I persevered. I cleaned, I cooked, I sautéed. I ate. Ultimately, I also learned to freeze. What a relief to disappear mountains of green stuff into the freezer in one afternoon—to say nothing of the pleasure of discovering it waiting there to be eaten, months later.

Almost a decade went by this way, and I began to consider myself a pro.

Then Hana asked me if she could pilot a market-style pick up location at my house this year. Instead of collecting a prepackaged bag of vegetables as usual, members would fill their own bag from the week's selection.

Why not?

I knew this method of distribution would involve regular leftovers in addition to the occasional forgotten share, but I didn't worry.

I considered myself a pro, after all.

That's when I found myself standing on the carport counting out 22 bags of various kinds of unclaimed lettuce. I checked the list of names on the bulletin board. Surely a slew of people had not yet come.

But they had.

This was just one of the quirks of the new system: guestimating how much food we'd need each week. Apparently, there had been a minor over-guestimation.

I'm sure you know you can't cook lettuce down.

You can't freeze it.

You must eat it, and eat it soon.

I called my neighbors, my family, my go-to-vegetable-eater friends, but everyone seemed to be on vacation.

So I shoved it all into my fridge and closed the door. When my husband, Steve, opened that door the next day and saw nothing but a sea of green, he stepped back and said, "Oh my god."

As expected, time whittled at the week far more quickly than we could whittle at that lettuce. Before I knew it, we were on the eve of the next vegetable delivery and my fridge had begun to feel like a scene from the Little Shop of Horrors. It was the greatest food management disaster in my personal CSA history.

So much for being a pro.

When I told Hana, she was so much less

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# Notes from the Kitchen

## Herb Drying

by Ciara Prencipe

If you come to my kitchen, try not to take anything at face value. In the fridge, there is a plastic Ricotta jar full of roasted beets, two former ice cream cartons now holding tomatillo salsa, and a newspaper bag carrying carrots. In the past year, my family has humored me as I've brought home fruits and veggies from the farm, tried my hand at cooking more and more from scratch, saved every peanut butter and pesto jar that passed through the house, and they've even started to join me in my food sustainability efforts. To my surprise, my mom and sister have been enthusiastically supportive of my newest food project, which will add another layer of disorder and mystery to our kitchen: drying our own herbs.

I'm sure many of you have picked up a fragrant bunch of herbs at the farm or the market, brought it home, used some, and found the remains turned brown and slimy after hiding in the fridge for a few weeks. Fresh herbs have a looming death day as soon as you cut them from the plant, and drying is an almost effortless way to preserve them if you want to season your food with PVF herbs into the winter.. On the farm I lived on in Israel for 2 months, we harvested

bushels of an herb like spicy oregano that grew wild; we dried it in mounds on bed sheets and spent hours stripping the stems of leaves and crushing the leaves by hand into a fine powder. The aromatic powder we combined with other herbs and spices to make zatar, a popular Middle Eastern spice blend. This homemade zatar, which was much more powerful than any store-bought seasoning I've tried, inspired my herb-drying project.

About a month ago, I took home 10 bunches of herbs, found some string, and hung them in the window – as simple as that. My first batch of herbs included mint, sage, oregano, thyme and dill. I forgot about them for a few weeks, and when I remembered, they were magically done and ready to be taken down from the window. My mom, hoping to prod me into dealing with the now-crunchy bunches, emptied out some old and nearly empty spice jars and washed them. I enlisted a friend to help me process the first bunches. We started with sage and oregano; over a piece of paper, we picked off the leaves and crushed them between our fingers, gently folded the paper in half and slid the herbs into their new (to them) homes. The oregano went into a poultry seasoning jar, and the sage is now in a jar labeled fennel seed. As the now leafless sage and oregano stems piled up, somehow the conversation turned to Wiccan sage-burning rituals and my mom led the charge outside where we used the bunch of sticks to have our own impromptu cleansing ceremony. I tried to cleanse my tomatoes of early blight, my sister invoked the sage smoke to cleanse her car of transmission problems, and my mom tried to cleanse my sister and myself of our bad attitudes.

This DIY project was enjoyably easy and engaging, so grab some herbs and spice up your future.

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dramatic about it. "Don't worry," she said. "Lettuce is mostly water anyway."

Oh.

So I stood in my backyard and dumped bag after bag of almost-slimy green stuff into the gaping maw of my composter, telling myself "it's just water," and "microbes have to eat too."

I'm happy to say the process of guestimating food quantities has greatly improved since then. And, in my opinion, the piloting of the market-style system at my house is going really well! I love how the "market" looks after Hana decorates my carport with the week's vegetables. I love that we all get to fill our own bags. I love how much fun everyone seems to be having when they come and "shop" for their shares. But I have to admit, I also love it when I can close up shop each week because each and every vegetable has been claimed!