Farm Notes

CSA Newsletter

Vol. 13 No. 9

September 24, 2012

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Forty Years of Nature Walks And Talks

by Mariette Hiu Newcomb

We've been giving guided tours of this tiny farm to school groups for at least 40 years. Just today, a woman picking up her share at the farm said her two sons, now in their mid-20's, remember when they came with their Meekins PreSchool class in the early 1990's to see the chickens and pick out their small pumpkin souvenirs. We hear these stories often and are particularly pleased when "tour alumni" come with their own children.

When I try to recruit friends to help us with the tours as guides, I say that it's like taking the children on a nature walk through the farm. It's great if the tour guides are gardeners themselves or know something about plants, insects, animals, and environmental issues and like to share these interests with others.

In the early years, I invited teachers to come for an orientation tour so they could lead their own groups for a small fee. We soon learned that they preferred to have one of us give the tour even if we charged a bigger fee. By now, however, there are teachers who have come for twenty to thirty years and could easily give the tour themselves. But they say they still learn something new every time they come.

And it is true that even though the basic tour hasn't changed since 1970 and the children still get a short hayride and walk through the fields and visit farm animals and a small pumpkin to take home, some features have changed. The farm now has houses on every border. As a result, we no longer have our own barnyard animals -- Lani moved her horses out of here when we built Blueberry Hill CoHousing Community and it seemed too sad to have the visiting horses confined to a tiny paddock and barn even though the children delighted in seeing these big animals close up.

We have small heritage breed pigs instead who entertain us and consume great amounts of leftovers and root around in our compost pile. The pigs and chickens provide opportunities to talk about where familiar foods come from, and current concerns about how most meat animals are raised. What we talk about depends on the age of the children, the questions we get from them and their parents and teachers.

Current interest in local foods and how they're raised, issues about whether we can feed ourselves (aka "food security") and concern for the environment and our exposure to toxic substances make these farm tours relevant and attractive to high school students and international visitors. There is plenty to talk about on this little patch of open space. We imagine we will keep talking for years to come.

If any of you want to and can help us with tours, don't be shy. Write us and we'll plug you in.

PVF History — Another Cultural Shift: Ninth in a 12-Part Series

by Hana Newcomb

The farm was now in its fourth decade. In the first thirty years we had survived drought, fire, the death of my father the principal farmer, and had created a sweet corn-centered farm economy. We had celebrated four farm family weddings in the Moutoux Barn next door and were growing more farm families. We were paying mortgages on three farms: 180 acres in Loudoun County, 30 acres in Fairfax County, and the remaining portion of the farm in Charles County.

In the early 90's we began to lose interest in the sweet corn business. We had a series of disappointing seasons, and there is nothing worse than trudging through miles and miles of scratchy corn plants and Johnson grass, searching for another armload of corn so you can finally fill your basket. The weeds were winning and the soil was losing. Ellen was discouraged by her years of growing corn. I liked picking it, but this was not so much fun anymore. It's no fun growing something that loses money, when you get right down to it.

So, while we had no idea that my mother's 1993 Genesis Farm sabbatical would be a turning point for our farm, we were ready for something new and different. Who would have guessed that it would be something as simple as a new piece of equipment? And something so basic as a tillage implement: a spader! Six months after coming home from New Jersey, my mother bought our first brand new spader – an Italian model since of course these things come from Europe.

Anyone who has never farmed for a living may not appreciate how seminal, how pivotal, how game-changing a spader would be for our future. (I see you all drifting away from this story – stay with me.) If you ask me what the most important advance of the 1990's was – other than the babies we had and Ellen moving to the Loudoun farm and the cohousing community we built – it was the advent of a whole new way of turning the soil.

So, without getting overly technical, this is why it was so important. A spader is an attachment that is powered by a strong tractor. It does the same work that a shovel does in your garden, but it's much faster and easier on the body. In one pass down the field, it incorporates all that is on top of the ground (weeds, plants, cover crop) into the soil and leaves a soft and crumbly surface ready for the next crop.

Before the spader came into our lives, we used more traditional equipment. We had a chisel plow and a moldboard plow and various sizes of disc harrows. Many farmers still use that technology, of course. But a spader is a precision tool – it's efficient and it allows us to till up one bed at a time, if we choose. For our farm, it opened the door to a new way of growing. We began to plant our small crops on raised beds using much more intensive spacing. On the Vienna farm, we began to be large scale gardeners instead of semi-successful row crop farmers.

On the Loudoun farm, Ellen had an even bigger package of improvements. She learned about Controlled Microbial Compost, took an intensive course, and convinced us to invest in a compost turner and a compost pad and a spader for that farm too.

They say you have to spend money to make money. They might not be thinking about a compost turner and a spader and a bedder, but that's the investment we made to push ourselves into the next era. It was an investment that paid off in so many ways. Our soil is so much happier and more alive, and our field management has improved by leaps and bounds. The soil is winning and the weeds are less overwhelming (but not gone).

We never know where we are headed, exactly, but the choices we made almost twenty years ago are still paying off today. We are much better farmers with these "toys."

Breaking News: Organic's a Sham

by Stephen Bradford

You're sitting at your breakfast table, innocently nibbling a delicious baby arugula salad from the week's CSA share, when you crack open the food section of the Washington Post only to be sucker-punched in the gut by the headline "Stanford Scientists Expose Organic Food Racket as Vast Nutritional Wasteland." Your jaw drops, and a half-chewed heirloom cherry tomato falls out of your mouth. Disbelief quickly gives way to anger. You feel betrayed, swindled. How could they do this to you? You trusted these hillbilly farmers! You demand answers. Is organic food really just an incredible scam perpetrated against yuppie chumps?

And the short answer is: yes.

There's really not a lot in the Stanford study that shocked me; it just further underscored the limitations of the organic certification standards and highlighted consumer's general confusion over the significance of varying growing practices. What did shock (and concern) me, however, was the reaction and ensuing conversation regarding organic food. Mainstream media sources often seemed to portray the study as not only an indictment of organic (which it is) but somehow a vindication of conventional agriculture. More progressive sources sprang emphatically to the defense of organic, claiming an underrepresentation of the significance of pesticide residue and extolling the virtue of environmental protection. What was conspicuously absent was a nuanced discussion of the benefits of a range of growing practices that go way beyond mere organic certification and an acknowledgment that nutritional content is just one (relatively minor) factor on a long list of important reasons to cultivate an intentional and conscientious relationship to your food system.

If you read this study and lost some faith in organic food, congratulations. You now know organic certification is not the be all and end all. It is a flawed and insufficient standard which caters largely to industrial agriculture yet benefits immensely from positive and often undeserved associations with local, biological, sustainable and fresh, family farms. Organic food can be grown in China and sold in Walmart; organic agriculture can be industrial and input intensive and produce ecologically damaging runoff; organic corporations can exploit their workers and mislead their customers. If organic food fails to distinguish itself nutritionally from it conventional counterpart, it is because it does not differ meaningfully in its growing practices.

Not using harmful, soil-destroying chemical pesticides may be a necessary condition for growing nutritious vegetables but it is certainly not sufficient. Building healthy soil conducive to nutrient-dense food is an intricate process of care and investment almost entirely antithetical to the demands of industrial agriculture. It requires biological diversity,

crop rotation, cover cropping, composting, organic input, fallow periods and a long-term holistic view. Beyond neglecting their soil, many large-scale organic operations fall into the same conventional pitfalls of favoring durability over freshness, flavor and nutrition by picking their fruit prematurely to be packed and shipped long-distance. Sparing farmworkers the often fatal exposure to carcinogenic agro-chemicals is perhaps one of the most laudable and underappreciated achievements of organic agriculture, but nonetheless organic agribusinesses have proven not to be above the patterns of abuse and exploitation for which many conventional operations have become infamous. Abstaining from chemical inputs is certainly a virtue but offers no guarantee of protection from the failures of industrial agriculture.

If I sound dismissive of organic food, it's because I really have no stake in the game. PVF abandoned the label in 2003 when it became a federal program under the USDA

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This Changes Everything

by Amy Halloran

Potomac Vegetable Farms ruined my life. Before this season I was able to enjoy places like Costco and Trader Joe's where I made rounds around the store like a racecar driver, enjoying endless samples of cheesecake and coffee. I was able to travel carelessly, eating cuisine that ranged from pad Thai to falafel carts. Those days are gone. No, those stores are not going out of business or disappearing from the landscape – they are simply disappearing from my life.

Like all great downfalls, mine began with bok choi. For years I had been eating grocery store greens, unaware that not all vegetables were created equal. The second that fresh from the ground, tender, juicy morsel melted on my tongue last spring I was dependent on its existence. And it was only the beginning because from there the season began to snowball with velvet better-than-a-prom-dress lettuce, died-and-gone-to-heaven tomatoes, eat-a-bucket-full sweet peppers, write-home-to-your-mother butternut squash, and on and on it went. I had found the one, the love of my life. I didn't pick him up at a bar – I found him in the dirt amongst pests and weeds.

As the season wore on, the question became, how does a person recover from a discovery such as that? How do I go on knowing that in a mere six weeks I am leaving this farm to deteriorate as a ravenous wanderer? The truth is, there's no going back. Sure, I could get a CSA, but the problem is I no longer eat like a normal human being. I eat chard for breakfast, peppers for snacks, whole pots full of steamed bok choi for dinner. I consume about 5 times the normal amount of vegetables a person is supposed to consume. Healthy? Maybe. Disturbingly obsessive? Most definitely.

The worst part – the clincher, if you will- it's the best job I've ever had. I used to teach elementary school, which is essentially corralling in a blouse. Before that I changed diapers for a living, I lived in a refugee camp, I cleaned toilets, I counseled drug addicts – all for peanuts and the promise that I was in some tiny way making a difference in the world. Then comes along little old PVF telling me I can cut lettuce for a living and get good person points. This was too much. What I came to learn about this farm and others like it is that what they do is downright noble in the way they treat the soil, the people they feed, and the love that goes into the every vegetable.

In the end, I'm destroyed. No job can compare to endless hours of sunshine and showing up to work in my sweats. PVF has left me little choice than to reroute my life, stick a piece of hay out the corner of mouth, and call myself a farmer. Plus, grocery store foods taste like cardboard compared the bounty in these fields. I'm hooked.

"Organic," cont. from page 3

in a process compromised by corporate influence. We settled instead on our own label: Ecoganic, a philosophy of stewardship that facilitates a heightened relationship of care for our soil, food, workers and customers. To lose faith in organic is not to resign oneself to supporting conventional agriculture, but to double down on the pursuit of a more personal and intentional relationship to a healthy, sustainable and socially responsible food system. So swallow that Ecoganic tomato with pride; it was grown on a local family farm with a 50 year history of respecting its land and its community – and it tastes pretty damn good too.