Farm Notes

CSA Newsletter

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Potomac Vegetable Farms
www.potomacvegetablefarms.com

Talk about Community and This Farm

A Community of Excellent Farmers

By Hana Newcomb

We have always worked with other farms to keep our CSA stocked with really good vegetables, and lots of diversity. This year it feels like we have reached a new level of collaboration, with the coronavirus keeping some farmers away from the markets and with our own record number of CSA members. Because we have been friends with lots of farmers for a long time, it was easy to establish new routines to meet all of our needs.

Early on Saturday morning, one of us gets into a van and drives down to Rappahannock County to The Farm at Sunnyside. It's a long drive toward the Blue Ridge Mountains and after about an hour you finally escape the crowded highways and get into the wide open green spaces. Sunnyside is managed by Stacey Carlberg and Casey Gustowarow – veteran CSA customers might recognize those names, as those two were farm managers at PVF from 2011- 2014. They now run a certified organic vegetable farm that usually sells at the Dupont Circle Farmers Market. This year they decided to keep their level of exposure as low as possible, and they are wholesaling almost all of their vegetables. They have been growing most of the beautiful kale and turnips and all of the collards and radicchio that you have been seeing in your shares.

Then on Saturday afternoon, one of us gets into a vehicle and drives to St. Mary's County to Sassafras Creek Farm, another organic vegetable farm owned by a talented farmer, Dave Paulk. He grew beautiful onions and some amazing beets this spring. Pretty soon he will start digging his trademark new potatoes. He also decided to stop going to farmers markets this year and instead has an online ordering system; people come to his farm and pick up their pre-packed bags.

In between those two deliveries, a van comes up from Charles County, Maryland – from the first farm that my parents bought in 1961. That farm is now Next Step Produce, owned by Heinz Thomet and Gabrielle LaJoie.

The current community of garlic harvesters

They focus on the early season crops for us because they are a couple weeks ahead of us in terms of warm weather. Soon they will start picking organic watermelons and cantaloupes, now that the kale and scallion season is just about over.

And just about every day, we come home to Vienna from our own farm in Loudoun County with loads of our own vegetables. It takes a LOT of food to keep everyone fed every week. Our coolers are stacked to the ceiling, and we move stuff in and out every day.

Our CSA is vibrant and diverse with the help of these other experienced farmers. We are reaping the benefits of many years of reciprocal generosity – when they need help, we go. When we need help, they come. It is an essential part of our well-being, the connection that we have with so many farms in our region. When I counted up recently, I found that we are closely connected to ten farms, either geographically or historically or through a lot of vegetable commerce.

We say it all the time. It would be impossible to do this alone. We are blessed with an abundance of community. And, by extension, so are you.

The Flower Bunching Community

By Isabel Hulkower

Every week after days of harvesting, washing, and sorting vegetables, we gather together to bunch flowers. Tables are set up, stems are laid out, and within minutes the back of the Vienna stand is bursting with color, brimming with floral mountains looking lush and inviting.

Flower bunching is an intergenerational activity. When I worked at PVF as a teenager I was surprised to be working alongside Hiu, Hana, Carrie, and other certified grown ups that ran the farm. It felt like being put straight into the big leagues. But newbies go right into the deep end, learning the PVF style guide of how to balance the bunch and avoid choking up on the stems.

I loved listening to candid conversations about our farm, and news about what was happening in our extended network of sustainable farmers. The intimacy of hanging out in the shade rather than rushing around in the afternoon heat fosters a different energy, and the small community that forms every Friday afternoon makes flower bunching a beloved task. It is truly a special part of the weekly cycle, second only to the potlucks that precede it.

Isabel with beautiful flower bunches on the farm

Growing Up Greene: A Berry on a Vegetable Farm

by Amani Greene

I grew up in Blueberry Hill Cohousing Community (BBH), which is situated on a corner of the former land of Potomac Vegetable Farms. My family was one of the original families to design and move into their homes in the spring of 2001. We moved across the country from California. I was five years old and started elementary school that fall. Although I do have memories from living in CA, the person I am today has been largely shaped by the people both in the BBH and PVF communities. As I become more aware of the rest of the world and my place in it, I continue to be grateful for the experiences I have had in these joint communities.

My elevator pitch for explaining co-housing is that it's a neighborhood where the neighbors want to know and interact with each other, so they agree to co-own parts of the community. In BBH, we own our houses individually and co-own several communal areas, including the Common House, which is like a clubhouse. In pre-COVID-19 times, we would have dinner there several times a week and celebrate various holidays and occasions together. Now we have daily socially-distanced happy hours.

Every summer my mom would volunteer at the farm stand and bring my sister and me with her. The majority of the children in BBH spent at least one summer at the farm. As we grew older, we slowly switched from playing in the various recesses of the stand with the other BBH kids to helping out, eventually getting paid when we were old enough to work. The farm workers transitioned from fantastical beings of omnipotent power and wisdom to people who are friends and mentors. There are now many people who are younger than me, which feels both normal and dissonant. It helps to drive home that I have truly grown up here. It doesn't properly feel like summer until I am at the farm.

I notice that Blueberry Hill and PVF are mostly matriarchal. The farm community is women-dominated and led, both here in Virginia and across the globe. My sister and I grew up surrounded by powerful women, who continue to inspire and motivate me to be the best I can be. Now I get to be a positive influence in the lives of the new children growing up in BBH and PVF. Those little girls are part of a beautiful and powerful cycle, and we are all in it together.

Community Seed

By Dick Clement

Sixty years ago, a "community seed" was planted. At that time, the planters, Hiu and Tony Newcomb, could not have imagined what has developed into the very special community of Potomac Vegetable Farms. Not just a farm: the co-housing community of Blueberry Hill, offspring startup farms, CSA customers, farm stand and farmers market customers, family blackberry pickers, school tours during the special month of October, seasonal workers who get to experience this community and carry this spirit of community with them.

Generations, Connected

by Mariette Hiu Newcomb

Farm and family have been connected since the early 1960's when Tony Newcomb and I started hauling our children back and forth between our rowhouse on Q Street and ground we rented to farm near Tysons Corner. We also frequently visited Tony's parents who lived in an old farmhouse on Beulah Road.

In the mid-60's we found the land we now farm and live on. We continued to plant sweet corn on rented ground near Tysons until big houses, shopping malls, and rush hour traffic took over.

Once we had our own land base, we built our roadside stand. In the 60's and 70's, our farm was thought by some neighbors to be some kind of commune. Some thought that all the young college-age workers who worked at the stand were my children. It was a source of curiosity and speculation since I was in my mid-30s with my own barefoot kids.

Sometime in the last decade or two (once there were nine grandchildren), Hana has started to call me "Gramma" when talking to our workers. So now my community which started off with my family has grown to include generations of workers, farm friends, and countless others, including great grands. Hallelujah.

Susi, Simon, Isaiah, Tara, Mimi – a new generation of farmers

Farming in Suburbia: the Mental Map

By Michael Lipsky

For many years I wrongly pictured Fairfax County and its environs as a relatively rural place stitched together by tracts of suburban housing and shopping malls. The reason I had this distorted picture, I believe, is that from 1994 when I started dating Hiu until we got married eight years later, if I left the farm I mostly went to places that were connected to farming.

In those years I was part of crews that picked beans at Odrick's Corner (now converted to soccer fields) and sweet corn at our other farm in Loudoun County. We visited friends who farmed in southern Maryland, and on the way home purchased parasitic wasps from the Maryland state laboratory to help control bean beetles.

Often with Hiu, I went to farmers markets in Takoma Park, Arlington and Falls Church (where we still go today), but also to markets in McLean and Vienna and at Columbia Pike in Arlington. I picked up sweet corn for the PVF farm stand from Nalls Produce in Alexandria, chicken feed from Southern States coop in Purcellville, and young chickens from an old farmer who lived off of Route 50 (now all suburbanized). I visited the Cox farm stand in Oakton and Hall Kern's fabulous Reston Farm Market on Baron Cameron near Leesburg Pike.

At the height of the season I delivered tomatoes to Marvelous Market and Chez François in Great Falls, and wandered into D.C. to deliver tomatoes to restaurants in D.C.--the Bread Line, and Nora's.

I knew how to get to all those places, and gave little thought to the countryside through which I was driving. Later, after I moved to Virginia to live full-time, I gradually discovered the location of supermarkets, movie theaters, banks, restaurants, hair cutters and doctors' offices. But for a few years Northern Virginia to me was a rural network embroidered on the suburban landscape.

A Community of Re-Users

By Caroline Luella Bond

This farm is known for vegetables, however it's also the place to ask for reputable mechanic recommendations and an amazing place to return your egg cartons to, instead of throwing them away. We offer a great living example of the waste hierarchy in the general Northern Virginia community. From year to year on the farm, waste is avoided and reduced by reusing equipment, structures, and tools. When things are broken, they are repaired or repurposed for as long as they reasonably can be.

On a worker level at the farm, I have learned there is value in taking the extra time to separate our waste streams. The main categories being compost, recycling, pig food or chicken scratch, and trash. It's not uncommon for us workers or our bosses to "audit" the bins and mistakes are quickly pointed out when they are heading towards improper disposal.

This type of thinking is contagious, in a good way, as I see that it directly encourages others to follow suit in their individual lives. For example, every week many customers and people from the surrounding eco-conscious community bring egg cartons to us for reuse along with other miscellaneous items. Even I, a fairly eco-minded individual, didn't start bringing veggie scraps to compost from home until I observed my more seasoned co-workers contributing to the compost pile. It was then I realized I was becoming part of a larger community of people -- and chickens and pigs -- trying to break free from the linear consumption patterns into a more circular one.

Birth of the Community Farm

By Stephen Bradford

As a child of this farm, returned now to work alongside my brother, aunt and grandmother as I raise my own daughter on this land, I feel more confident than ever that the family farm is dead. There are no family farms, never were, only community farms that might not have quite figured it out yet. The extent to which small farms can orient around this simple truth will determine both their long-term viability and their relevance in addressing the most pressing challenges of our times.

Potomac Vegetable Farms is on that path. We are navigating the dynamic and fruitful tension between family and community, identity and inclusion, structure and transformation. Where so many small farms have struggled to attract and retain workers against a backdrop of rural and suburban cultural impoverishment, we have survived and thrived by moving towards more complex interdependence and by cultivating more community on and around the farm. Other families have always been core to the operation of farm, and the business structure was opened up to allow for non-family owners. In response to the challenge of generational succession on family farms my aunt and mother planned and built a co-housing community on the farm that allowed them to continue living on the land they grew up on with a vibrant cohort of co-creative neighbors. And now it is with this same energy of community building and collaboration that I have returned to the farm to explore the proposition that there is some socially transformative possibility present in our relationship to this land.

In this effort of community building we have been motivated by a deep faith that healing is possible on this land where colonizers dispossessed native populations and where people were once enslaved. We believe that this land has a lot to teach us about living in communities of ethical interdependence if we can properly humble ourselves. But despite our best intentions at inclusive community building, I know that the story of the family farm is still very much alive on this land owned by my grandmother and through it I still enjoy a problematic degree of privilege and power that will continue to complicate our shared journey towards community ownership. Trust, I have learned, can be slow to build across worlds of difference, and the experience of belonging I enjoyed growing up on a family farm cannot be taken for granted for others who have since moved to this land to build beloved community with us.

Moments of shame for me give way to gratitude, as I am reminded that there is no contradiction between my impulse toward community and the comfort I feel in my family. I feel grounded in the love, acceptance and commitment that I learned first on this land and I offer it back to the growing community of families learning to belong together on this land.

A cart full of flower bunches – ready for market