

Farm Notes

CSA Newsletter

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Potomac Vegetable Farms
www.potomacvegetablefarms.com

Adapting and Coping and Thriving in Covid Times

Like everyone else, we have had to learn new ways of coping, as we strive to avoid contact with covid-19. We had to decide whether the risk of going to market was greater than the benefit, and we decided we could navigate that and we were not ready to give up our markets. In fact, the market experience is much less wonderful for the customers now because they cannot visit with each other, and they have to move with purpose and direction. They can't hang out and eat prepared foods and drink coffee because the masks have to stay on at all times. Having our customers shop purposefully has not been a bad outcome for us, but we recognize that farmers markets are less fun than they were.

We rearranged both of our roadside stands, converting to deli-style systems. For the first few months, we didn't let anyone touch the vegetables. As we learned more about the virus, we gradually adapted our display, but the cashiers are still behind a barrier. Every customer became a suspect. Every co-worker as well.

But, like all of you, we have found silver linings. When you have to dump out all your systems and start over, it is possible that you will find new ways that are better than the old ways. Even when we are finally free of this airborne disease, we will never go all the way back to our carefree systems.



The market during Covid has barriers, but plenty of produce.

Some of the pluses –

- We wash our hands with so much more intention, as now it feels like a question of survival.
- Like you, we are cooking at home so much more now. So we are really eating better than we used to. On the other hand, some of us had never tried take-out, and this is a new way to eat restaurant food.
- We think very carefully about going anywhere off the farm now. This means we are driving much less, which in the end has got to be better for the planet.
- There is so much more time now, after work. No meetings, no appointments, no entertainment. So those projects that we never had time for, we are getting some of them done. One person said she has read 23 books since Covid started. Another says that her stovetop has never been cleaner. And the people who do crafts are using their time so wisely.

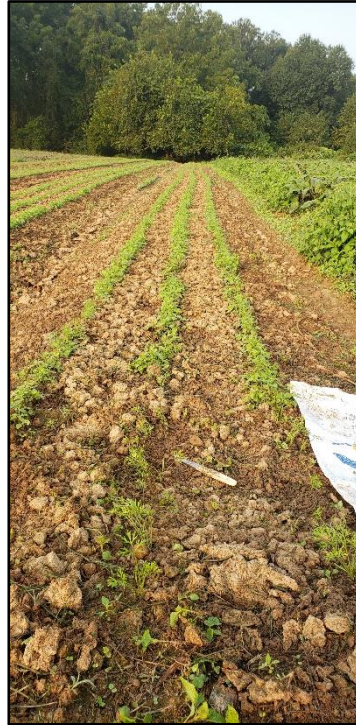
Reflections on A Shift

By Kathryn Culbertson

Within the first few days of the shutdown in March, it occurred to me that our family needed to consider how our typically nomadic summer lifestyle would be curtailed. We have largely depended upon farmers markets and roadside stands to supply us with the bounty of fresh fruits and vegetables of summer. Our typical buy-in of eggs, beef and pork for the year were quickly unavailable. And our plans for learning and teaching throughout the summer had come to a screeching halt. Many farms in the DMV were opting to not attend local farm markets, or sell their produce through weekly boxes or extensions of their CSA shares. I set out to determine what we might be able to afford and commit to and quickly found that PVF's shares were both an excellent deal and still available. Having known the Newcomb family for years, and purchased produce regularly (albeit one market day at a time), I signed up for a summer share. But I also saw another promising option on the website.

It seemed that the Farm may still need hands to work for the season. So I clicked through some of the other pages to see how it was managed (by women) and the overall philosophy of growing and providing produce to clients (using ecoganic practices). I also saw that the PVF Farms were actually two locations, and I was delighted that the Newcomb Family had grown their enclave into a community of people who clearly cared for the land they occupied.

I didn't immediately send an email and resume. But each day thereafter, I woke up thinking about the opportunities that seemed to



Baby carrots in the field.

abound in reconnecting with PVF. By the following weekend I decided I had to at least send Hana a note and see what she thought. Her first response was to ask if I was really certain that working on a farm was what I wanted to do. And by that time I was thoroughly excited about the possibility. I grew up in a farming family and had spent the greater part of my childhood summers on farms, in the woods foraging or hunting (more in the fall/winter) and tending my grandmother's extensive garden. After two career changes, and 15+ years of teaching in public schools, I gravitated to being an Environmental Educator in the past few years. It hadn't occurred to me until I started drafting my email that I had considerable experience to offer: I wouldn't be green, and I had age/wisdom on my side as well.

After a fun and casual meeting with Hana, Carrie and Hiu in early April, we all decided to give each other a try. I started working at PVF one chilly and sunny April day pulling garlic and weeding carrots. Each week became a new adventure throughout the spring and summer. Now, six months later, I've helped grow and nurture plants to yield their bounties shared each week with over 500 households. I've met some of the most wonderful people I've ever known. And I've also pulled and plucked more weeds than I ever imagined I would; definitely becoming a true believer in the meditative benefits of tending carrots, cucumbers, tomatoes and herbs (among other things).

Over 50 years of eco-focused management practices have created an oasis of health and well-being in the midst of a frequently dysfunctional suburban environment. The clear and loving commitment that everyone demonstrates to providing the best food possible each week is remarkable. And the benefits to being on the land, experiencing first-hand the extensive, robust ecosystem that exists have not only helped sustain my health and nurtured my soul, but also buoyed my faith that we may emerge from this trying time better than we were before. This farm is truly a labor of love in all of its forms.

This year was supposed to be a shift for me both personally and professionally. And while it wasn't the one I planned, it may - in hindsight - be exactly the one I needed.

CSA

By Hana Newcomb

Without knowing that this was going to be a completely different year from all past years, we decided last year to go to customized shares for delivery in 2020. It seemed like the group would be small and we would be able to handle this added level of detail. And when the coronavirus complicated our plans, we adapted. Back when we didn't know if surfaces were harboring the virus, we had to strategize about handling containers which were returning from people's houses – would there be a contaminated area in the delivery van and how would we separate that from the boxes that were outbound? First we researched cardboard cartons but decided they were too flimsy. We turned to plastic boxes and plastic liners, which is the opposite of our 20 year old system of re-usable cloth bags. We reasoned that the CSA members could just lift their vegetables out of the box and never touch the box. Later, all that caution turned out to be excessive, but the boxes are supposed to last for many years, so that's a good outcome.

We tried to visualize the CSA room, as the membership grew and grew. It is a 12x12 room, air conditioned, with shelves all around. Beautiful when full of vegetables, but quite crowded. We thought about timed entries. We thought about tickets. Ugh. We looked around to see if there was another answer and we found that we had

already built the exact right space for market style social distancing – we had used it as our packing area for deliveries for many years, but in one day it turned into our wide open market style area.

In the end, it feels like our CSA members like the new ways better than the old ways. Like so many other workplaces in the world, we have had to adapt quickly. But unlike most other workplaces, none of our answers have involved Zoom. We just get to work outside, like always.



The packing area that became a CSA room that allows social distancing.

Farm Tours

By Michael Lipsky

Over the years the Vienna farm has hosted thousands of pre-schoolers and elementary school students through school tours. No one remembers precisely when school tours began but we do know that every year or so we welcome children whose parents had come to the farm on a tour when they were young.

This year we realized early on there would be no school tours. Kids were going to school virtually. They would not be getting on buses to spend an hour with us walking about the fields. We wanted to continue to use the farm as an educational resource. We needed to do so safely.

Hana came up with the idea of offering tours of the farm to families or groups of families which had decided that they were safe with one another. Everyone would wear masks, and tour guides would practice social distancing.

We have been happy with the results. The program has attracted 75 children by the middle of October. This is a tiny

fraction of our historic numbers, but we have enjoyed hosting a Brownie troop from Great Falls, and a local social club that provides cultural enrichment opportunities for the children of members. There have been good balances between children and adults. The walks through the vegetable fields and berry patches, the pig pen and the chicken house are provided by farm workers and a few loyal customers.

For younger children we emphasize tactile experiences that can trigger interest and engagement. We pick and smell oregano, sage, mint and other herbs, and savor the rich aromas given off by Sweet Annie, the myrrh of legend. We invite the children to pick and taste cherry tomatoes, turnips and kale (with parents' permission, of course).

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For older children and interested adults we point out and talk about sustainable farming practices such as mulching with hay and a biodegradable plastic-like film, crop rotation, and composting. We also discuss the economics of farms like ours that sell directly to customers, in contrast to mass production factory farms.

If you have an interest in farming, we probably have something to say about it. As one of the guides, highlights for me include being able to talk about the following:

- A frame from a dismantled bee hive. We examine the hexagonal wax cells that make up the honeycomb, and talk about the role of bees in pollinating squash, cucumbers, and other crops.
- The vibrant hyacinth beans just beyond the mail boxes near the stand. On the same stem we can see attractive flowers next to tiny pods that emerged

overnight from pollinated flowers, next to more robust pods that are beginning to host tiny beans. At least through October 9, these deeply purple beans were still attracting pollinators.

- The corn patch. Most children have never seen corn growing. A red flint field corn, truly “as high as an elephant’s eye,” is stunning in the depth of its color and its robust ears. Climbing up the field corn stalks are vigorous pole beans, following a planting practice attributed to Native Americans. We also draw attention to a smaller corn with yellow kernels that doesn’t seem so remarkable to the children until they learn that it’s popcorn.

If you and your family are interested in touring the farm we have more information at this internet address: <https://potomacvegetablefarms.com/about/educationalprograms/>.

Preparing for Market

by Olivia Murphy

Since the recent return of fall greens, most weekend workers have noticed how wonderful it is that, starting this year, we no longer bag leafy greens in the morning before market. The old way goes like this: it’s chilly at 6:15 in the morning, the greens are all damp, and you have to stick your freezing gloved hand into the crate 100 times, usually squatting in the back of a truck with a scale, rushing to get perfect things out on the table before market starts. Now all that preparation happens the day before.

The COVID safety plan for most farmers markets has included encouraging sellers to make everything as pre-packaged as possible, to prevent possible COVID contamination from customers picking through vegetables. For us, that means far less selling things “loose” or by the pound, and far more selling a box, bag, bunch, or individual item. In Vienna, Friday now culminates with 5-8 masked people around 6 tables bagging crates and crates of greens so it’s all done and ready the night before. The purpose of this has to do with keeping it all sanitary, but a happy effect is the slightly less icy fingers.

At the same time, a sad drawback of this set-up is all the plastic we now use, that we previously had many methods of avoiding. We always pre-weighed and bagged some of every item, for display and for grab-and-go shoppers, but before COVID we sold many things loose at market, and would put crates of lettuce mix, various mustard mixes, baby kale, tatsoi, arugula, etc. straight on the tables to be weighed out with tongs or bowls by the

pound during market. I have huge love for all the regular customers who brought their own bags; plastic bags reused a dozen times, various cloth bags, even tupperware! You could buy anywhere from a quarter pound or 2 whole pounds of spinach at a time if you wanted. You could get highly specific mixes by asking for a half pound of one thing with just a tong-full of something else thrown in (rare and annoying, but cool). What freedom of choice! What thoughtful low-waste options!



Preparing for market in Covid times.

Now we go through sleeves of plastic every week. All part of avoiding the spread of a deadly pandemic, which obviously is worth it. An entirely new system is born. But dang let’s rinse and reuse those bags! Friends don’t let friends abuse single-use plastic.