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Communities and families and businesses and countries all have rituals and traditions, routines and systems – that’s what helps to form our identity as a group and what helps us to get the work done without making up new methods each time. Our farm has many work-related rituals and just as many food-related traditions and a satisfying number of annual events that mark the turning of the seasons. Some activities come around every week and some only happen when the blueberries are ripe (The Fourth of July Pickernik) or the last CSA day is here (End of Season Dinner). Here we describe some of the rituals that help to define our farm.

Flowers and Food: Favorite Friday Rituals

by Rachel McCormick

As a part timer at PVF I can’t say I’m here for every potluck or for every flower bunching, but I am here enough to know I enjoy them very much. From my very first potluck lunch when Carrie brought hot and scrumptious Mac & Cheese to the most recent one where Jon made a wonderful layered dip which included Guacamole, I can say these are two of the best things about working here. Many delicious meals and desserts have been eaten at these potlucks!



photo by rachel mccormick

Swallowtail caterpillars.

Flower bunching is a fun ritual too, partly because we work in the shade on those hot summer and fall afternoons. Susan is always there, cheerful and moving around us like an Olympic slalom skier preparing buckets and moving buckets here and there for us bunchers; enabling us to bunch on and sometimes on and on and on. Yes, sometimes bunching goes on for very long. One morning, Annie and I were picking Sweet Annie for the next day’s last bunching of flowers for the season. (Yes, Annie in the Sweet Annie patch! this should be noted for posterity). She noticed that older patch of dill which had gone to seed was especially pretty. “Ah, those are so lovely, can we use those in our bunches?” A quick text with Hana and the answer is “Yes, that is what we saved them for, go for it!” So, we did. We saved some Eastern Black Swallowtails Caterpillars that were munching up that dill along the way. There were scores of them. I’m glad we picked those dill flowers with those beautiful Umbels and their

delicate frilly greenery. It made the bunching a bit more exciting the next day. Leah came to the next day’s bunching as well. Annie was there too. They both make great bunches and seem to completely love doing it! It is fun to be in that atmosphere. Carrie is usually there and Hana too, hopefully. Sometimes, other things happen during bunching time...washing radishes, holding babies (that one time, how great), making lists, getting CSA orders together and selling at the stand. Mostly though, we are all there, getting it all ready and doing it together!



photo by rachel mccormick

Swallowtail butterfly.

Sacred Time, Making Art

by Leah Fenster

The ritual of flower bunching goes something like this: on Friday afternoons, we stand at tables piled high with beautiful messes of rainbow colored flowers while a whirlwind of market truck loaders run from cooler to truck (with veggies in tow) and back again. In spite of, or perhaps because of the organized chaos that occurs all around the stand, this time of the week feels sacred.

While bunching flowers this season, Annie and I bonded over our appreciation of the utterly artistic way that nature plays with color in the faces of flowers. We'd play with color too, choosing to pair indigo salvia with orange marigolds, rusty red rudbeckia with pale green celosia, peachy zinnias with neon purple ageratum. Somehow, most of these combos seem to work out.

One of my favorite memories of flower bunching this year was when Rachel, a Friday truck loader, challenged Annie and me to make a series of bunches, specifically arranged for certain events, for her to judge. The first was "a bunch that Rachel would like best." Annie won that time. The second was "a bunch to woo a lover." Annie won again. The third was "a bunch for Rachel in mourning." Once



Dill in flower bunches.

again, Rachel chose Annie's bunch. The fourth was "a bunch for Olivia." I put a huge, brain-looking celosia right in the middle of that bunch, and when Olivia came around to judge, my bunch won in an instant. Ha! Victory at last.

On a different day, while making bunches next to Hana at the "grownups table" she said, "Some people come to this farm thinking it's a landscaping job. They'll tell you how well they work outside and how strong they are. But I always ask: 'How are you at art?'"

Bunching flowers is one of the most artistic things we do at PVF. There are many others: arranging the veggies for the CSA, transplanting lettuce so that it follows an evenly spaced, four-row pattern throughout the bed, even understanding color enough to know when a clementine tomato is not quite orange enough to be fully ripe. But flowers are grown intentionally to be art. That's meaningful.

Growing Ginger

by Mariette Hiu Newcomb

This is the first year I have had anything to do with growing ginger. Because it was planted in the plastic high tunnel next to the greenhouse where I start and tend seedlings, I agreed to water and weed it as needed. I visit it every day and admire its beautiful green stalks and smell its sweet gingeriness. And when night temperatures started to drop into the 50's a few days ago, we knew the rhizomes, whatever their size,

would have to be dug up soon.

They had only been in the ground since May though Hana had ordered the organically grown seed ginger last winter from a Hawaiian grower. In that subtropical climate, the ginger is allowed to grow almost a year. Here, we put the brown "mothers" that look like supermarket ginger into trays with potting soil in February. We put them into old refrigerators with a light bulb to keep them at 70 degrees.

It takes a few months before they start to sprout in their trays and we move them out of the heated greenhouse when the weather is warm enough in May. We plant the sprouted "mothers" into deep troughs. Over the next

few months, we gradually fill in the troughs as the plants get taller.

In late October, I snipped the stalks down to ground level, used a digging fork to loosen the soil, lifted up beautiful clumps of ginger rhizomes that were not anything like the brown ginger we buy in the stores. They weren't ready to be dug: they were full of healthy roots that wanted to keep going but that had to be dug and trimmed off because they were growing in Virginia, not Hawaii. They looked so fresh with baby skin. Still they were ready to be sliced to be made into tea, or added to stir fry, or nibbled raw and refrigerated. They give us so much pleasure even after such a short season.

Report from the Chicken House

transcribed by Michael Lipsky

From the chicken house in Vienna, a wide-ranging conversation with the 35 mostly brown chickens in residence. In transcribing the conversation, we had help from Lani Newcomb, the legendary animal whisperer of Loudoun County.

Almost every morning the old man comes into the chicken house an hour or two after it gets light to open the nest boxes. Some of us would like to sleep in the nest boxes, but no! Everyone has to sleep on the roost.

After he opens the nest boxes he takes the two pails of water out of the chicken house, dumps them, and returns with fresh water from the faucet just outside the door. We really like fresh cold water on hot days.

We're not so happy with the food, though. He feeds us a



photo by hana newcomb

powdery mix of ground corn with cracked corn and other seeds added in. We peck around in it but in the end leave most of it to sit for a while.

It's different with the food that comes in big white buckets. For a treat we sometimes get carrot, beet, or turnip tops. We get leftover apple mash from making cider, and tomatoes with rotten spots. If there's a lot of it we all dive in. If there's only a little, we fight over the scraps and run to corners of the chicken house to munch at leisure.

We sometimes get ears of

already-eaten cooked sweet corn. It turns out humans leave a lot of the corn on the cob when they eat sweet corn. Our beaks are perfect for extracting the yummy nuggets from cooked ears of corn after people are finished with them.

We don't eat everything, though. We don't like onions, peppers, eggplant and anything hard to peck at, like winter squash.

Sometime in the afternoon the old man comes in to check on us. He gathers the eggs we have dutifully laid during the day—two dozen or so—and closes up the nest boxes. One of us (she'll remain anonymous) stubbornly remains. She insists on a chicken's right to remain on the nest at night. The old man gently lifts her out of the box, puts her on the floor of the coop, and then ties up the boxes.

As it gets dark we wander over to the roost. Some of us are practically asleep as we settle in for the night.

Setting a Bountiful Table

by Susan Maneechai

A fellow worker likened the process of setting up the market style CSA in Vienna as preparing for a dinner party. I know the names, guest list numbers -- which changes four times during the week from over 100 to the more intimate 19 -- and their arrival time. The goal is to present an enticing display of the variety of produce in its respective packaging, whether bagged, bunched, boxed, or numbered. When I first became responsible for setting up the CSA, my visual and spatial abilities were a bit challenged. Colored produce needed to be intentionally placed to break the shades of greens and differently shaped baskets selected to bring order to some items while acting as holding containers for others. Additionally, a sense of marketing and art was required that butted



photo by hana newcomb

Susan (right) sets up the CSA at the PVF stand.

against my linear organizational skills. It became necessary to separate the pepper family. Sweet peppers on one side and hot peppers far to the other side with shishito peppers somewhere in between to avoid an undesired selection of heat. Then there's the use of half-pints under the smaller, herb-filled baskets to provide a gentle lift for better viewing. Not every item can be gracefully arranged; our table of sweet potatoes is a current example. During the summer, it was the large cardboard boxes filled with watermelons.

Thank you for coming to our weekly dinner party. We do love arranging the table.

The Ritual of Loading Trucks

by Olivia Murphy

Like clockwork, every Friday at 1:30pm, when my belly is truly stuffed from potluck, the time comes to load the three trucks that are heading to Reston, Arlington, and Falls Church markets Saturday morning. We've spent the last two days picking all the veg for the weekend, and now we load on any non-refrigerated food and all the market infrastructure supplies. There are at least two clipboards involved in this job and a lot of walking back and forth, climbing up and down, pointing, checking, double-checking, interrupting Hana to ask for confirmation of various vegetable choices, and most of all, squeezing and wiggling things into the trucks in an organized way.

In the heat of summer, on go the ponies of tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, squash, cucumbers, potatoes, garlic, and onions, all foods that can stand a warm night outside. In the fall, sweet potatoes and winter squash. And as the seasons change, there comes a week where it's cool enough at night to load on leafy but sturdy things like broccoli, bok choy, kale, ginger, and more.

Then there's getting each market the right number and type of tables, legs, tent tarp, bags, baskets, pints, quarts, signs, banners, and on and on. This job appeals to my sense of order and some would say control, I would say service. I used to think this should all be written out in a way where anyone could walk up and do the job, but it's not only a matter of following a quick checklist. It's being aware of what supplies came off what truck over the course of the week, knowing the preferences of each market point person, and communicating frequently with Carrie and Hana. It's a ritual I love and feel good at, even though many many times I have missed something that I swore was accounted for, and at 6am the next morning a truck rolls out with the wrong size tarp, or



photo by hana newcomb

Olivia, Rachel and Cat load the trucks one Friday.

half the number of pint boxes they really want, or no scales, or (at least one time) no potatoes. Thank you everyone for living with me anyway. It has sharpened my truck maneuvering skills immensely, and given me the total satisfaction of working with somebody who knows just what to do in step with me without a lot of talking. Rachel deserves a huge shoutout for her brawn and for working with all my demands so well, and crucial partners from years past, Katy, Robert, Dario, and Abdul. Similar to stand-up hoeing, I can think of truck loading as a laborious brainless task, or it can be transformed into something artistic, athletic, complicated, and amusing.

Other rituals that get an honorable mention:

- The Wednesday or Thursday "what are you making for potluck" group question.
- Hosing/sweeping a week's worth of mud off the concrete floor of the wash station every Friday afternoon, leaving us sparkling for next week.
- The pure joy and relief of using the outdoor shower in Loudoun in the summer.
- The unpredictable day in the fall where the first wagon load of hay arrives at the Vienna farm and the empty hay barn gets refilled to the ceiling with much swearing and sweating.



photo by anna newcomb

The annual photoshoot at Reston Farmers Market, with six PVF faces in the crowd.