Farm Notes

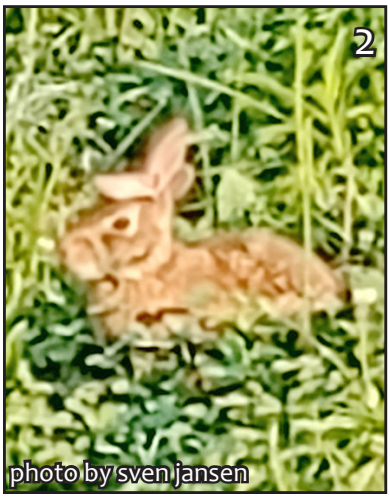
CSA Newsletter

Vol. 22 No. 6

August 8 — 12, 2021

Potomac Vegetable Farms
www.potomacvegetablefarms.com
pvfnewsletter@gmail.com

Found on the Farm



(1) This is a dried up dill umbel that had gone to seed in the cold frame! It looked like a firework, and I picked it on July 4th, which I thought was very cool. I am excited to report that many of these seeds are now happily growing in my backyard. (2) It's not very clear, but the other day I spotted a three-eared bunny. We stopped and had a little chat until they hopped along into some shade. I like to think this rabbit is a protector of the farm. (3) Olivia collected and saved these baby mantises from certain peril in the pod kitchen. (4) Every rock featured in this collection is a PVF Rock Contest hopeful, biding its time in a basket until it can compete against my coworkers' rock findings in the second contest later this month. Any rock found on either farm can be entered to be judged by a 3-person panel, the winner taking home the golden "Best PVF Rock" belt and receiving untold fame and fortune. The tricky part is knowing which rocks are winners and which rocks will amount to little more than stubbing toes, a secret which this reigning champion cannot freely disclose to the press...

Found On the Farm: Buried Treasure (and dirt under our fingernails)

Many lifetimes pass / Crawling along the earth / sifting dirt through fingers / ensuring all the potatoes dug by tractor are gathered and carried out of the field / It's easier to find the bigger spuds / Sometimes a rock tricks me / One of us holds a grudge against the fingerlings / Find a heart-shaped potato and share / Dirt under my fingernails / toenails / Dirt in my pockets / pant cuffs

- by hc

Found on the Farm: Good Weeds

By Michael Lipsky

A weed is a plant that is not valued where it is growing, according to a common definition. But what do we call the plants whose seeds we didn't sow but nonetheless welcome? Here is an incomplete account of volunteers in the fields we are glad to see when we find them.

Wild mustards in the early spring, with vigorous yellow flowers, are welcome and delicious stir-fry ingredients (if you like mustards).

Early spring dandelions are as bitter and as good for you as their more cultivated cousins, which we now grow deliberately in neat rows. Before we grew dandelions as a crop I occasionally gathered the leaves of wild ones for sale at April markets.

Last year's garlic, left in the ground because their stalks broke off, produce green shoots from every clove. I used to gather them in the spring for sale at markets as well.

Lamb's quarters, a member of the amaranth family, is related to spinach and is just as tasty. It can appear abundantly in June in ground that has not been worked for farming. Two years ago we discovered an enormous patch in Loudoun in a neglected pile of farm residue. We picked it for market for several weeks.

Another welcome plant that arrives in July, unbidden, is purslane. This succulent was more abundant before the recent era when the farm increased its commitment to intense cover cropping and making sure no ground is left bare. Recently I've found purslane in corn patches where it seems to thrive after an initial hoeing of the corn in June.

Every year we see vegetables growing from seeds that sprouted from last year's crops. Usually they are turned under or grubbed out in the course of growing the new year's vegetables. This year maybe some of the corn, potatoes, and cherry tomatoes that have emerged from last year's crops will survive to harvest.

My favorite uninvited but welcome farm visitors are the modest reddish-orange poppies that appear in a particular section of the five-acre field at the Vienna farm. That section of the field is intensely weeded, cultivated and sometimes covered with a biodegradable film to suppress weeds. Yet every year enough poppies survive to perpetuate the population for another season.

Chilled Athena Melon Soup

Ingredients:

- 3 Athena Cantaloupes peeled, deseeded, and diced into 1-inch pieces
- 3 cups plain yogurt
- 1/4 cup brown sugar
- 1/4 cup condensed milk
- T tbsp fresh mint chopped

Directions:

1. Mix yogurt, brown sugar, and condensed milk in a bowl.
2. Add cubed mellon & yogurt mixture to a blender or food processor and puree.
3. Served cold with a sprig of fresh mint for garnish

recipe from heather miller

This specimen found on the farm is a sure sign that we are in heavy tomato season! Pictured here is a pest called a hornworm. They are large green caterpillars that can grow to the size of a finger, have a poky-looking spine protruding off their butt, and will eat all the leaves off your tomato plants if they're left unchecked. This one is actually a tobacco hornworm, not a tomato hornworm; they have slightly different body markings but both kinds eat tomato leaves. They also have a natural predator — parasitic wasps lay their eggs (those are the little white specks in the picture) in the bodies of live hornworms. When the eggs hatch, the hornworms are destroyed. A gruesome and fabulous example of how ecoganic agriculture is all about cultivating a biodiverse ecosystem.

Found on the Farm: Margin Profits and ATMs

by Hana Newcomb

We all know that farmers don't make a lot of money, the result of a historical and cultural belief that farm work is unskilled and food should be cheap. Not to mention that farmers must contend with weather, and weather is only partly predictable and has no vested interest in our well-being.

Even with those challenges, our farm has been in business for 60 years. No one is getting rich, but everyone has a place to live, food to eat and enough money to pay the bills. Every year we get a little bit better at what we do. Learning takes repetition, and we have been learning and teaching these skills for a long time now.

As my father the economist always said, with great seriousness: "income must exceed outgo." This means that every crop we grow has to participate in supporting the farm. We can't grow something that loses money unless it has another higher purpose (like being so seasonally irresistible that it pulls people to your stand at the farmers market). Every head of lettuce must pay for more than its own upkeep — there are real estate taxes and insurance and tractor repairs that all get paid for by selling vegetables.

We are, of course, quite frugal. But there are expenses that cannot be minimized through frugality, and that is a fact of life.

We could decide to grow only the vegetables that are super profitable, but that would be so much less interesting. The joy of being a diversified vegetable farm is the diversity. We have to strike a balance between the crops that are only marginally profitable and those that are like an ATM. The easiest way to explain this is to think about which plants produce many times over (tomatoes, squash, eggplant, basil) and which ones just happen once (garlic, onions, kohlrabi, potatoes). The ones that produce week after week are the ones that have the most potential for creating a surplus and the ones that get pulled out of the ground just one time had better be worth enough money to make it all work.

Let's take onions as an example. They grow really slowly, they start out like a tiny blade of grass (after two months in the greenhouse already) and they have to be planted as a plant, not a seed in the ground. They grow much slower than weeds. If you graphed the speed of an onion growing compared to a weed, you would wonder why anyone grows onions. The reason to grow onions is that they are a beloved and essential food. So we have had to devise all kinds of ways to let the onions have a head start on the weeds since we don't use any herbicides. (You should know that non-organic commercially grown onions are totally infused with pesticides and herbicides. That's because they are hard to grow and chemicals take away some of the work.) Many years ago, we set the price of onions at $3/lb because that felt a fair price. It is an astoundingly high price for onions. We have never changed it in 20 years. It still feels fair. And it makes it economically viable for us to grow and sell onions.

Local birds build home, raise family in cherry tomato plant.

When my parents started farming generations ago, sweet corn was their main crop. Over time it became clear that this was not an economically sustainable choice. It uses a lot of ground, a vast amount of nutrients, you get only one or two ears per plant, and it leaves the soil much worse than it was at the beginning. We stopped growing corn after we were certified organic. But people love sweet corn and it would be great to figure out how to grow it without chemicals — we just have to figure out a price that will make it work. It is the CSA that will motivate us to try.

The CSA changed everything. First of all, we now had a source of income during the winter months as our CSA members support us while we started the season. Secondly, it changed the way we value the food. Now a quart of sweet potatoes can be equal to a pound of tomatoes, if we want. With the CSA, we think of everything as a unit, not a unit that needs to compete in the marketplace. We still think about how much it costs to grow a one-pick product but if we decide to grow something just because it's popular and delicious, the CSA will make it possible. Potatoes are an example — we barely sell any at the markets but the CSA eats them up. We consider them just as valuable as tomatoes, but most customers who are doing a price comparison would never think so.

This is the tip of the iceberg with this topic. It is unendingly interesting, running a farm business and making choices that will help us to stay in business.


photo by hana newcomb

(Left) In the top of the horse barn there are artifacts from the 1970s when we had draft horses. Singletrees, harnesses, pieces of horse drawn equipment. Clearing them out for renovation. We don't have draft horses anymore. (Right) Yellownecked caterpillars (moths) modeling their alarm posture in the blueberries in Loudoun on July 9th. I was just as alarmed as they were!


photo by maggie hirschberg

Found on the Farm: Natural Resonance

by Colleen Ryan

I've recently started reading fiction again, starting with the book *Prodigal Summer* by Barbara Kingsolver, which came to me via recommendation by some coworkers at PVF. This book has all the information of an essay about the profundity of the connection between humans and the ecology we live in, the effects of herbicides on life, the fate of rural farm families, and the value of community, all wound into a novel that on its surface seems to be simply telling the stories of people's lives. My coworkers spoke highly of the book but didn't really explain to me what it was about, so imagine my surprise when I read the description; "a hymn to wildness that … weaves together three stories of human love within a larger tapestry… of southern Appalachia" I grinned to myself and realized I didn't think books like that even existed.

Prodigal Summer came to me just when I needed it. I have long been someone who sinks into nature — my connection with it, the human part in it — when I need to find my place in the world. I had recently begun to feel my sense of that connection board itself up, possibly out of self protection on a hurting planet. The way this book shows human and planet to be undeniably woven together helped me to open up that sensibility again.

The book follows three people, each of whom brings a specific perspective of the same rural Virginia town and ecology into view. Deanna is a woman who lives high in the mountains working as a park ranger. She's fiercely independent, lives alone, sees no one, and wants it that way. That is, until she finds herself falling into a passionate affair with a hunter called Eddie Bondo. Lusa is a recently widowed wife of a farmer and a moth entomologist who struggles as she tries to find a way to live both with her grief and with her husband's tight knit farming family that never accepted her, an educated woman from Lexington. Garnett is a curmudgeonly old man, brazen sprayer of pesticides, believer in conquering nature, and careful caretaker of chestnut trees. Each of their stories blossom into connections with other people as their lives expand and change shape.

As someone who has dreamed of moving to the woods and not coming back, Deanna's lens of the story spoke to me most. She makes good on what Mary Oliver has said: "attention is the beginning of devotion". I loved her clear devotion to the ecosystem around her, attention to specific plants and animals, and the way she talks to Eddie about the value of predators when you consider an ecosystem. I admired and envied how deeply she had rooted herself into her mountain home. Her story takes you close to a nest of birds, a family of coyotes, a snake, the smell of a stump, and to what it means to be one human being lying close to another.

This book is sensual, devastating, and heartwarming by turns. If you find a copy — on the farm or elsewhere — you should read it.