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## Welcome to the Abundance of Autumn!

by Hana Newcomb

On the last week of summer shares, I was talking to a CSA member who said, “see you next year!” Of course I wanted to know why she wouldn’t be continuing into the fall (where would she get her vegetables?), so I asked her. Her answer was that she doesn’t like root crops. Fair enough. But fall is so much more than root crops! To us, it is the most diverse and delicious season of all. The summer vegetables eventually peter out (goodbye tomatoes) and a whole new range of cold hardy vegetables come in: Asian greens, cabbage, broccoli, lettuce, four kinds of kale, arugula, kohlrabi. This is when we finally dig the ginger and turmeric. Plus there are the winter squashes. And what do you mean, you don’t like root crops anyway? Who doesn’t like carrots and beets and sweet potatoes? I admit that turnips and radishes may not be for everyone but everything can

be roasted into deliciousness!

Anyway, welcome to our newest CSA members and thank you to those who are continuing on. Our fields are full of amazing food. Yesterday’s CSA display was a feast for the eyes, with 18 different colors and shapes. The eggplant is finally reaching peak production and the tomatoes still smelled like summer even though they are getting ugly. As always, fall green beans are the best of the whole year and they have a few weeks left before frost.

We know that most people might not know what is in season at any given time. But a CSA customer is a sophisticated cook by the time they have eaten their way through spring, summer and fall. A cook who knows to take advantage of every opportunity, knowing that the life cycle of a plant is short, and the choices change every month or so. Eat well and be well, everyone!



photos by annie manville

A look at early fall farm foliage.





# Carrots Are the True Test

by Hana Newcomb

I could feel the collective silent groan, the deep sigh of the group, when I said that we were going to try to finish weeding the last two beds of carrots last Friday. They had been weeding that field for weeks, sometimes alone for hours, sometimes with a few others, and progress was so slow. It's not a hateful job but you have to have a certain patience as well as a body that is willing to be balled up close to the ground for a long time.

But we had got to the critical point where we might not have carrots if we didn't get in there and finish that task. The weeds were tall and bushy and the carrots could barely feel the sun.

It's not that we had done nothing to tackle these weeds before. A few days before they came up out of the ground, Casey flame weeded the whole field, killing all but the grasses (which are impervious to flame). Then he cultivated every few weeks with a precision set of cultivators, taking out all the weeds between the rows. But weeds never give up.



photo by michael bradford

The carrot crew after finishing the big job of weeding.

They germinate in the rows and the only answer to that is hand weeding.

If you go to the farmers market, you will see that very few farmers grow carrots. There's a reason for that: they are really challenging to grow. Getting them to germinate in the summer is an exercise in stubborn attention – the seeds need cool soil and a good amount of water. So we have to set up irrigation that will water the

carrots every evening, keeping them moist but not sodden. This year the germination was excellent (and the weeds really appreciated the regular water). There are years when we have to try multiple times to get the seeds to come up, but this was a good one.

Dave Paulk of Sassafras Creek Farm has cracked the code on carrots. He grows over an acre of certified organic carrots and he has a mechanical harvester. He devotes 18 months of preparation to his carrot field, growing cover crops and tilling in weeds for months before he plants the seeds. He even waters the field before planting sometimes if it is a dry summer. There is almost no handweeding at his farm. We are nowhere near that, as carrot growers.

So after we finished the Friday morning picking, we all met in the carrots at 10 AM and we got it done. It was muddy, we were energetic, we plowed through those beds of Pennsylvania smartweed and grass, and the carrots will grow big and strong now.



photo by annie manville



# When the Wait Is Worth it

*Ciara Prencipe, lover of orange-fleshed vegetables, shines a light on some plants we've watched grow for months. This interview was edited for length and clarity.*

**We're here talking about winter squash. Before we dive in, I want to know: which is your favorite?**

I have two favorites. One is kabocha, which comes in early and it's a specialty, so it feels like it's a different genre than the butterkin, my other favorite. The butterkin is a classic orange-fleshed, like butternut type squash. It's shaped like a pumpkin, so it's much cuter than the, forgive me, phallic butternut. I think it tastes better.

**How do we grow butterkins?**

This year, we simplified our process. Usually we would start seeds in the greenhouse in flats with 50 cells per flat, which is what we often do for cucumber and squash. Two seeds per cell, then transplant that out onto black biodegradable plastic and the aisles mulched with hay. So we used a tractor to do 80-90% of the mulching with big round bales of hay. Then we came in and fixed some spots by hand. So that was a huge time and labor saver. Additionally this year, we put the seeds straight in the ground. We did that by driving down the rows with our transplanter, which pokes holes at the right spacing. The squash need a lot of room to grow. After we put the seeds in the ground, we put wire hoops over them and cover them with a white, breathable cloth to keep the bugs off the plants, otherwise they'd get eaten to shreds. Then we wait, and wait and wait and wait, and then we wait some more. We harvest them when the skin turns the right color. Those

seeds we planted in June.

**And what about harvesting?**

So we've got a long field, more than 300 feet. We go out with our pony baskets and a tractor pulling a wagon. Forming an organized line, we spread out across the field to clip the squash off the vines. Sometimes you can snap the squash off with your hands, but the stems are pretty hairy and last time I got a cut. We gather the squash, walk them to the tractor trailer and pass them to whoever is on the trailer, and they have the honor of putting the squash carefully in crates. We leave the squash in crates in the greenhouse for at least 10 days. I don't understand the biomechanics of curing, but the heat and the time convert starches the plants grow into sugars. This makes both squash and sweet potatoes taste sweet. The longer you hold onto them at home, the sweeter they'll taste. Don't put them in the fridge, it's too cold. You can leave them somewhere warmish in your kitchen, on top of the fridge, on the counter. They'll taste better in February than they do now.

**You mentioned not putting squash in the fridge, can you share other tips for getting the most out of squash season?**

Yes, so if you notice any black spots on your squash, use it quickly. Otherwise you'll lose your whole squash, which is pretty dang sad. Recently I've been baking sweet potato bread, and I love pies with kabocha and butternut. When you get pumpkin pie, it's often butternut squash or an even bigger roasting squash. Big Pumpkin doesn't want you to know that. So, I use my Instant Pot to cook my sweet potatoes and squashes when I just need them soft for another process later. Either mashing them and putting them in bread or making a custard and baking a pie. I've also made a sweet potato custard pudding sort of thing. I've grated a raw sweet potato and baked that. Sweet potatoes are a big part of my diet in the winter. They're so versatile. I put them in curries, in soups. Sometimes just half a sweet potato, an egg, salsa, cheese -- that's lunch. People should eat as much sweet potato as they can,

*continued on page 4*



Olivia learns a new skill, following the tractor and lifting the sweet potatoes from the digger -- it's hard on the back and the legs and the knees and the pace, while slow, is relentless.

continued from page 3

there are so many this year.

### Can you say more about growing sweet potatoes?

Oh man, we're supposed to be talking about squash, but I've veered into sweet potato land. Here we go. Sweet potatoes are a crop that I have so much affection for because they grow so well here. It's kind of like how I feel about mustard greens, but they taste arguably better. The sweet potatoes are similar to the squash, in that they are in the ground for a really long time. We do a big harvest, which is a lot of fun, then they go into the greenhouse to cure like the squash. Our first planting was 5,000 plants, and then we did a similar size second planting. The sweet potato slip, which looks like a twig that grows off the sweet potato, is what we plant to grow more. Mostly we plant Covington, which is the big classic, with the orange-flesh and red outsides. We also planted some white sweet potatoes, which are a little

bit odd looking but very delicious, and we planted a Japanese purple sweet potato with white insides, the Mirasaki, also incredibly delicious. We don't plant as many of those because their production is half of the orange ones. So agriculturally, it's questionable to grow those, but we grow so many sweet potatoes that we want to have a little fun with it. \*laughs\*

### What's a funny-shaped squash you harvested recently?

I've found butterkins that are like two little pumpkins connected with one stem.

### Anything else you want the people to know about winter squash?

It runs out fast! It's hard to store it. We've tried experimenting with different preparations before storing. We're typically done distributing squash by the end of December, so get it while you can. If you love winter squash, join our winter CSA.

### Belated Bio: Kelly Burdette, she/her

I'll get the boring stuff out of the way first. I'm Kelly, and I just started at PVF in mid September. I grew up in Arlington and just graduated from Virginia Tech in Environmental Science last May! I've never worked on a farm before but I'm happy to be here and back in V.A for the fall!

I'm passionate about the outdoors (huge shocker, I know), and my dream is to become a wildlife biologist someday. I've worked seasonal jobs for two years now, including international work in Belize. My picture was from some reptile trapping I did in Arizona. I'm also working on a research project right now evaluating home range size of jaguars that I'm presenting at the National Wildlife Society Conference in November! I'm very thankful to be a part of this workforce and community, so I hope I'll get to know everyone else better soon.

In no particular order, here are some facts about me:

- I'm a redhead, twin and

southpaw!

- In my free time I like to draw, play video games (The Legend of Zelda series and Okami are my favorite), watch anime or go birding!
- I'm obsessed with Dungeons and Dragons. I play in 3 campaigns and follow DnD podcasts like Critical Role. I'm not insane yet since I only own one set of dice. But I like to think my Scottish/Dwarvish accent is



pretty decent.

- I have a clay frog in my car named Wobble because it has a broken foot.
- I love Star Wars, Marvel movies (though I'm a fake fan) and Survivor
- My favorite color is olive green and I LOVE anything camo
- My nickname is Birdie ("Burd" ette), which I think is really cute and fitting so feel free to use it
- I have a habit of overworking myself or getting too consumed by work sometimes but I'm working on it!
- I really enjoy deep conversation and learning in general. I keep a list of questions about the world in an ongoing email to myself to go back and figure out later.
- I'm allergic to plaster
- I'm afraid of wasps/bees (I respect them but the buzzing noise irritates me). I'm also a big coward when it comes to horror media or ghost stories.