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Living with Bugs on the Farm

by Michael Lipsky

A key concern of many supporters of PVF is whether we use chemicals on our crops. They understand that controlling insects with chemicals is standard in conventional agriculture, and they want an alternative.

The farm has been committed to avoiding industrial pesticides since the 1980s. We reject the use of broad-spectrum chemicals because they are indiscriminate, killing not just destructive insects but also the ladybugs that feast on aphids and the bees and wasps that pollinate tomatoes and squash. Chemical pesticides also harm soil microbes which are critical to productivity. Instead, we tolerate a degree of insect damage while pursuing a variety of targeted strategies to control them.

An approach to insect control common to all farmers (and gardeners)—so fundamental it sometimes escapes attention—is the importance of rotating crop families. Knowledgeable growers avoid planting members of the same family of vegetables

in the same place year after year because insects harmful to crops, and specific disease-bearing molds and blights, persist in the soil over winter. We don't follow onions with scallions, leeks or garlic, just as we don't plant tomatoes where last year we had eggplant or potatoes.

There are ways to target specific pests that don't involve chemicals. To protect bok choy and other tender greens from being consumed by aphids we exclude them by laying a light, airy fabric (called remay) over seedling flats and early plantings in the field. When potato beetles threaten to overwhelm tomato plants we go into the field and pick them off the plants one by one. It's a costly but sometimes necessary intervention.

In some years we go high tech and purchase thousands of predatory wasps that naturally control Mexican bean beetles, but don't overwinter in our area. The wasps lay their eggs in the larvae of the beetles, multiplying quickly over several generations. With this approach we expect to lose an early bean planting made to facilitate the growth of the wasp population, but expect later plantings to be relatively beetle-free.

On rare occasions we resort to pesticides approved for use by organic growers; for example, when broccoli and other young brassica plants are getting chewed to the ground in the middle of a hot August. Pesticides specifically made for organic growers are typically made of naturally-occurring bacteria or plant material.

As a diversified vegetable farm, we minimize the build-up of pests that can overwhelm farms focused on one or two crops (soybeans and corn, to take a widespread example). Because we farm at two locations we also have the luxury of skipping a year



photo courtesy of rachel udall

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There You Are

by Brandon Walker

As some of us are already aware, farm work is a legitimate way to travel and get around whether that means international or domestic. For although not everyone can take a vacation in the traditionally understood way; most anyone of most age and levels of experience can seek to find opportunity in the region/direction that magnetically attracts one. To this, I can attest.

For those that knock, a door may be opened. And with a healthy dose of non attachment to outcome, I have often been surprised at what opportunities have materialized in an unlikely and roundabout manner. One thing tends to lead to another. For I have lended my service to homesteady folks on wintry nights near the great lakes, as well as to animal farmers tending their private oasis in the high desert of the southwest. Over occasional brews and good food, someone tends to say I may know someone or, I know a place you may be interested in...and from there it's on.

For what we are really navigating is the landscape of the heart and mind. Wherever you go, there you are. Traveling around the wilderness that is the US of A, is for me the texture of a life desiring to be spirited away. For I have harvested vegetables first in my home in the deep south, and then the same in new england, and the same in the heart of the midwest... and now again in the heart of the mid atlantic east coast. And it is an entirely brand new experience, each and every time.

Just as each year and every day is a life of its own, so too is the version of you that emerges with each new setting, and a kaleidoscopic turn of different groups of people. Maybe the greatest lesson of all waiting to dawn within, is a steady and sincere grasp that here and now may not ever be so again. You are a one of a kind person in a one and only place and time. To cultivate that kind of awareness into an extension of loving and gratitude is the harvest which gypsy farm centric types (such as I) like to spread around. A wild cultivar that seeks to leave a

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growing a crop at one place if insect pressure there builds up uncontrollably.

Also, by investing in our soils—employing soil-building

cover crops, making and adding compost, minimizing tillage where possible—we grow healthy plants. Healthy plants attract fewer pests than unhealthy ones.

Finally, we accept and tolerate a degree of insect damage, and



place better than they found it. This lifestyle may not appeal to you personally, but by supporting small farming communities such as Potomac Vegetable Farms and all friends of PVF; you are in some subtle way communing with those drifty types, that are as essential to the American landscape as the birds we see every year, steady in their arrival and departure. Taking only what it is needed and providing whatever may be provided before moving on. If migratory people weren't essential in the modern day USA, I wouldn't have been hired on in Kansas, in Minnesota, in northern Virginia, on and on and on and on.

For anywhere you can imagine, things are being grown, goods produced, houses being raised, dreams being actualized. For the real truth is that every farm I've ever set foot on has left me better than they first found me. Each field in every season, some way mysteriously leads me closer to the heart. And so the next time a stranger or a loved one asks you where it is that you want to go; feel free to tell them, destination anywhere, east or west, I don't care. You'll ride in the backs of trucks down strange roads, for no matter how much the crops stay the same, the sweat and the exertion stay the same, the dynamics of people remain the same, the wind, the sun and the rain remain the same; it is you yourself that will change, most importantly.

trust our customers to do the same. If there is a blemish on a bean or a hole in a Swiss chard leaf, we don't discard it. We sell it to customers who appreciate our sustainable approach to growing their food.

Greetings from Afar

by Leah Fenster

Working in the rain and spending lots of time in the kitchen. These are probably the two biggest things I've accomplished this summer working and living at Tumbling Shoals Farm in North Western North Carolina. As I write this, I am nearing the end of my third month out here in the Brushy Mountains, and if I didn't know already, I understand now that the weather here is certainly not the same as it is in Northern Virginia. When I first announced that I was going to work on a farm in North Carolina for the summer, lots of people asked me, "You want to go where it's even HOTTER?" But truthfully, the elevation out here has kept us at a very comfortable mid 60s to mid 80s range throughout most of the summer, which has been a joy to work in. What I didn't know about, was the rain—around 90 inches a year, which is nearly twice as much as we get at home. Out here it's normal to hear thunder at



photos courtesy of Leah Fenster

8:00 a.m. (a rather disheartening morning alarm). The one week in June where it rained for five straight days was a challenge, but I am now adept at working in one size fits all rubber overalls and switching my raincoat out every 2 hours for one that isn't totally saturated.

The rain in this valley is tough on the veggies too, so lots of things are grown under cover—peppers, tomatoes, even cucumbers—to mitigate disease. My boss Jason once told us, "You'll notice, the only places on this farm that aren't flooded are the fields," and he's right. I now have a pair of tall, polka dot rubber boots from Tractor Supply that were one of my best purchases of the summer, and I hope they bring polka dot energy to many more seasons of farm work. One day at the beginning of August, the farm got around 4 inches of rain in less than an hour, resulting in the adjacent creek cresting the banks and flooding the nearby beans, ginger, and okra. We spent the next week trying to harvest as many beans as possible before they all got moldy, and replanting washed up ginger plants found far outside the ginger field. The mud that week was muddier than I'd ever seen. Good thing for those tall boots.

But there's nothing more I want to do on a rainy afternoon than be in the kitchen. I share the worker kitchen with two other co-workers who live on the farm, and I often spend evenings in there with one of them, telling stories and listening to music on the old radio I recovered from forgotten farm storage. I love being in this kitchen. I haven't made anything too crazy, but lots of jars of wild blackberry and peach jam, pesto, pickles, roasted pepper spread,

and tomato soup have been in and out of the fridge this summer. I've also been having fun dehydrating lots of seconds tomatoes. Overnight, 8 tomatoes destined to rot in the compost can turn into colorful morsels of sweet and tangy tomato candy! It blows my mind every time. My favorite projects include an amazing blueberry pie, and pumpkin bread made from a volunteer compost pumpkin. It will break my heart a little to trade this kitchen for a dorm come September.

I have learned a lot this summer about what it means to work on a small, 4 acre farm, but I miss PVF (and all the flowers) (and all the people) dearly too. And I feel blessed that I can still very much consider PVF home.



The Diary of Thomas Ant, PVF Resident

MONDAY

Finally finished moving into my new hole. Smaller than my last place but cozy. Situated in a beautiful if touristy part of the lettuce woods. Great places to eat nearby (lots of aphid nests). Only qualm are these massive structures situated right outside my door. My neighbor James Ant calls them 'spritzers' and complains about them constantly. I told him I kind of like the eccentric architecture - besides, what harm are they doing? Anyways... things seem to be looking up for me. Excited for this new venture! Dinner consisted of three grains of sand I mistook for crumbs.

TUESDAY

Early this morning James Ant comes over and starts ranting about the spritzers, says they've started spraying water all over the place blah blah blah. Told him too tired, don't care. A few hours later I wake up to my bed and belongings completely flooded. Waded through mud and water over to my window and indeed it is all the fault of the spritzers. Seems I'm going to have to move AGAIN. Had a light dinner of eight water droplets and two dead aphids that floated through my window.

WEDNESDAY

Traveled all night



photo courtesy of rachel udall

through the dense grass forests and this morning stumbled upon a lush valley of carrot tops. Spent the morning hollowing out a hole in one of the carrots and by early afternoon was situated in my new home. Smells heavily of carrot but other than that, can't complain. Took an evening stroll and met a kindly worm, asked her why the neighborhood seemed so quiet. She said it's because the carrots weren't weeded properly and are known to spontaneously turn to rotting mush. I laughed it off but as soon as I returned home my new apartment was covered in a thick slime mold and had lost all structural integrity. Sigh. Pitched a hammock in the carrot frills for tonight and will try again tomorrow. Dinner obviously

consisted of carrot.

THURSDAY

As I started my journey this morning I crossed paths with a group of maggots slowly squirming up the road. Told me they were headed towards the tomato fields, a 'delightful place to make a home'. I followed their directions and came across what seemed like miles and miles of gorgeous, gigantic, uninhabited tomatoes. Found an unoccupied sungold and climbed in through a tiny hole in the side. Kinda wet and slimy inside - bit of a fixer upper - but I'm happy as can be. Had a lovely nightcap of fermented tomato juice and slept like a pupa.

FRIDAY

This morning my entire house was picked from

the vine and dropped into a bucket. Been trying to climb out but the sides are too slick. Lots of time for reflection in here. Trying to imagine where it all went wrong. Have eaten through my entire house in my stress. Now laying my head on a seed and trying to get some rest...

SATURDAY

Was rudely awoken in the wee hours of the morning. Couldn't see what was happening outside of the bucket but was jostled around endlessly for seemingly hours. Suddenly I find myself being poured alongside the tomatoes into a giant blue paper box. A large sungold fell directly on my head and I was knocked out. Had a strange dream where I was the subject of a transaction at the Falls Church farmers market, whatever that means. When I came to, I found myself in an entirely new, strange location. I climbed out of the blue box and wandered across what I can only describe as a tasteful granite countertop. And then, standing like a monolith before me - a huge yellow bag with grains of sugar simply spilling out from it like rivers of gold. I chewed my way into the side of the bag and had a delightful feast - I think I've finally found my forever home!