



Vol. 25 No. 9

September 22 - 26, 2024



POTOMAC VEGETABLE FARMS  
[www.potomacvegetablefarms.com](http://www.potomacvegetablefarms.com)  
[pvfnewsletter@gmail.com](mailto:pvfnewsletter@gmail.com)

## How to Fix Things

by Michael Bradford

When everything is working, Hana is in charge. When something breaks, It's her husband, my uncle Jon's job to fix it.

Jon says he's not a farmer. He's not a mechanic, or an electrician, or a plumber. He says he doesn't know much of anything, and doesn't do much of anything. Yet somehow he is essential to all of these systems. There is a sense that without him everything would just fall apart and never be put back together. He doesn't fix and maintain everything himself, but he knows where to get parts and where to get help. He knows what to ask of Mark Trader, the mechanic who comes around once a week.

He works alone, for the most part, in a world that has seemed mysterious to me my whole life. A tire goes flat, Jon takes it away, and a day later the tire is fixed and back on the vehicle, like magic. When the irrigation leaks Jon brings in some very specifically shaped pipe connectors and special glue and just makes it all work again. A tractor breaks down and Jon loads it onto his large trailer to take it to Pennsylvania, and returns it to the barn in working condition a week later.

Sometimes I ask him questions like "what happened in Pennsylvania? What was wrong with the tractor and why did it need to go all the way over there to get better?" I don't usually understand his answers, but I gather that Pennsylvania is just one of those places that takes care of specific, difficult things. His head is full of these places.

While these helpful places remain fairly mysterious to me, the work that Jon does on the farm has become increasingly shared with me or passed on to me. I know how to fix a tire, how to lay and fix irrigation, how to sharpen mower blades and replace belts, how to use and maintain a chainsaw and a



Jon with his granddaughters. Nothing to fix there.

weed whacker, because he taught me.

When I acquire a fixing skill from Jon I feel like a magician. Something essential and mysterious becomes simple, understandable, and adjustable. At the same time, I understand why he says he doesn't know much or do much. A tire is just a piece of rubber. To fix it you just find the hole and put in a plug. It's not a big deal. And If you can't fix it, you just need to know who to ask for help, which is easy because that person is always Jon.



# Everything is Breaking All the Time Constantly

by Ciara Prencipe

Looking through the recent photos I was struck by how many pictures of broken things I have on my phone. It's hard to overstate how much of being a farmer is fixing broken things. We have at least one person full time fixing things, and pretty much everyone who works here more than one season has to learn some basic fixes. Sometimes a fix takes hardly any time at all - those are my favorite. Sometimes they're complicated, difficult, frustrating, confusing, or even make you want to throw your hands up in despair.

I thought I'd share with y'all a non-comprehensive list of what has been broken on the farm recently:

- Hole in the drip tape in our ginger, resulting in a large puddle/small flood that had to be bailed by hand, or the ginger would rot
- A valve on the fertigator
- A leak developed in a juncture on some underground irrigation pipe, for which we had to dig a large hole on order to even get to the leak to fix it
- A truck battery, which we had tried to charge but was at the same being drained. Later fixed with the flip of a switch before charging again
- A golf cart which behaved itself for some people (or more specifically, the person who was trying to figure out what was wrong with it) and didn't for others (everyone else). Still at large
- A cooler
- A gear box on a tractor
- Many more irrigation leaks
- And many more....

All this to say, whenever you eat our vegetables, just know they were picked hastily in between trying to fix whatever is broken that week. It's a miracle we get anything done around here!



When we find an unexpected wet spot on the ground, we dig a hole and it fills with water... confirming the problem. Repairs often involve hands and knees and mud.



Though I frequently find four-leaf clovers, averaging three a week, a five-leaf clover is uncommon.



# Why We Have 16 Tractors

by Hana Newcomb

Some farms have just a few reliable vehicles and one or two tractors. Our farm has been in operation for over 60 years and we have a vast accumulation of tractors, trucks, vans, golf carts, skid steer loaders, mowers – plus a huge line-up of implements that go with the tractors. When we try to add it all up, we think we have over 50 internal combustion engines to maintain, not counting chain saws, weedwackers, and generators. We buy at least six new batteries a year because that is how many go bad every year.

This philosophy of over-capitalizing goes back to our long ago origins. When he was a young man, before he ever thought of having a farm, my father was already collecting up cars and trucks. He was a self-taught mechanic. As a teenager, he had his own tractor for a small mowing business. He was famous at Oberlin for working around the “no cars” rule, owning a Vespa scooter, a truck, a car that was sanctioned by the school because it was necessary for a business transporting students to and from the DC area – and two airplanes. I kid you not.

When my dad found Paul Benton working on the dock at Southern States, he figured out pretty quickly that this was someone worth bringing into our orbit. How did he know this? He learned that Paul owned a car, a pickup truck, a motorcycle and an airplane. He had the makings of a farmer. Eventually Paul came to work for us, helping us through the transition when my dad died, maintaining our equipment and cleaning up the aging piles of stuff that had been acquired at farm

auctions.

Because we have so many tractors, we can keep going when one of them needs repair. The same is true for our fleet of vehicles. We have enough to keep going when one of them is out of commission. I remember clearly one season in my youth when there was only one truck still working – out of about 6 – and that truck was shuttling back and forth, doing all the work. As the only mechanic, my dad was chronically behind on maintenance and repairs. There was a broken dump truck in the middle of the slab (the slab was where things got fixed, in front of the shop) for a full year, and we ducked under the side mirror whenever we walked past it, scarcely noticing it anymore. To finish out the story about the one working truck, we were driving to Odricks Corner, four miles up the

road, in that truck when suddenly the battery caught on fire. The battery was under the floor on the passenger side, so this was memorable.

In the last 40 years, things have improved considerably in the repair and maintenance department. We have a super effective mechanic who comes to one of the farms once a week and works on the list that has piled up. Jon does all the repairs he can manage, and we never get down to just one vehicle anymore. Practically no one remembers how it used to be. I have not had to walk away from a broken-down truck on the side of the road in decades and decades. Certainly not since the advent of cell phones, which would have helped a lot back when my dad was the mechanic.



photo courtesy of carrie nemec



# Full Circle

by Chip Planck

We moved to Loudoun in 1979 to start farming. For truck maintenance we used a small operation east of town, Purcellville Tire and Auto. The owner was business-like, but uninteresting. His days of crawling around under vehicles were long over. He was often playing cards with visiting friends while the actual work went on in the back. What I enjoyed on the appointments was talking with Donnie, the mechanic who did the inspections. While he went through the criteria—lights, brakes, alignment—I studied the attendant minor repairs, and asked questions.

Donnie was perhaps a few years out of high school, slim, soft-spoken, efficient. Like many an auto mechanic, his hobby was restoring classic cars. There were always a couple of gorgeous trophies in the parking lot—Plymouth Furies, Mercury Montegos. His special decor in the inspection bay was a big color poster of one of his refurbished cars with his girlfriend gracing a fender. How's that for eminence, for girl or car?

After several years of these arrangements at Purcellville Tire and Auto I learned to my great pleasure that Donnie had bought the operation. The rational evolution of a small business culture had

transpired— from hands-on accumulation of know-how to credit-worthy management takeover. And so for many years Donnie left the inspection bay and ran the show. His former wife, still on good terms, even worked the front desk for shifts.

Until, for me, yesterday, when I took the last of a long line of trucks in for inspection and learned that the business had changed hands. While my historic data was entered in the new system, there still standing was Donnie ready to do the job.

We greet:

C: "So you're staying around to show them how it goes?"

D: "No, I sold it; I work for them now."

This was neither time nor place to probe. The business thrived and you cashed out, or failed and you liquidated? You still enjoy doing inspections, or it's a necessity? Indeed, there may never be the right occasion for those questions.

We part:

D: "How are you doing? My regards to Susan (repeated)." C: "Thanks. We are fine."

C: "And how is your family?" D: "I'm fortunate."

And so go the business dramas of Main street if you are around long enough to follow them.



photo courtesy of stacey carlberg

PVF crew processing onions for CSA and market.



photo courtesy of oscar ruth

Cat Baker with a pail of watermelon slices at a late-summer farmer potluck.