Whenever we teach someone how to do something (which is often), it usually only takes a few sentences to explain the job. These tasks are not complicated: weed the carrots, pick the cherry tomatoes, bunch the flowers. Anyone from 6 – 86 years old can understand the requirements of almost any discrete task we do.

And yet, it is a rare individual who can actually do any of these jobs correctly on the first, second, or tenth try. While the brain understands, and the spirit is willing, the hands need to learn the moves. Farming takes a lot of practice. It’s not that different from jewelry-making or knitting or plumbing. Artists and farmers see with their hands.

Ellen and I have the fastest hands on the farms, and we are always hoping that someone will come along and challenge us, so we don’t have to pick such a huge proportion of the total harvest, day after day. We were not born with these quick hands, but after 20 – 30 years of repetitive activity, they work like machines. It’s not that different from jewelry-making or knitting or plumbing. Artists and farmers see with their hands.

Ellen and I have the fastest hands on the farms, and we are always hoping that someone will come along and challenge us, so we don’t have to pick such a huge proportion of the total harvest, day after day. We were not born with these quick hands, but after 20 – 30 years of repetitive activity, they work like machines. My hands have short, stubby fingers and big, chunky palms. Ellen’s are more graceful and feminine, with long, slender fingers. Both of us have scars all over the backs and the fronts of our hands, from years of use.

When I was about 13, I learned to pick sweet corn. This is a prime example of using your handsight. The leaves of the corn plant are so obstructive and dense and sharp-edged that you have to keep your eyes closed half the time, just to protect your eyeballs. You move down the aisle, between two rows, with a bushel basket tucked under your (non-dominant) arm. Your eyes tell you there’s an ear of corn, and your picking hand takes over. While your eyes seek out the next ear, your hand grabs the corn at the top, thumb down, pinky finger up, decides instantly whether it’s ripe (years of practice, years and years) and yanks it off the stalk with a downward twist.

Now the early morning activity has evolved from cornpicking to flower picking. It’s a different skill set, but the hands are still key. With my left hand, I gently hold the zinnia just below the bloom (and if I feel any slight buzzing/trembling, I let go immediately because I have disturbed a sleeping bumble bee), and with my right I nip the stem. While my eyes choose the next flower, it takes a micro-second to transfer the cut flower to the bunch that’s forming in my left hand and I move on to the next zinnia. Every zinnia is cut the same length – my arms and hands know the measurement. As Ellen says, “clipper management” is harder than it looks.

Bean picking is the most graphic example of speedy hands. We generally pick in the heat of the afternoon, when we have finished all the crops that need to be harvested wet and cool. We sink to our knees between the rows and let our hands go on automatic pilot. This only works if your hands have that setting. Most new bean pickers have to go through many sweaty, tedious hours of disentangling beans from the vines before their hands just take over. Ellen and I can talk and talk, and our hands will seek out the beans, rearrange the plants, snatch the beans and toss them into the basket, without our attention.

(See page 2)
Recently I damaged my left hand (the one with the good vision) and had to wear a huge bandage for almost two weeks. It was like having a bulky blindfold on. I bumbled around and felt humble. I was supposed to keep it dry, which was nearly impossible, and everything took about twice as long to do. Unfortunately, I could still pick beans faster than everyone else, so I was not excused from that job. It was such a relief to get my fingers out of that wrapping so I could see again.

We remember the rare workers who have found that they have fast hands. Some of them have gone on to be farmers, but most have not. I am sure, though, that the skills they developed on the farm have been transferred to their new vocations. Seeing with your hands is always a bonus.

Hana Newcomb

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**Can We Sustain Our Food Supply?**

**Tuesday, September 13, 2005**  
**7:30 – 9:00 p.m.**  
**Falls Church Community Center**  
**223 Little Falls Street**

- What are the primary causes of diminishing cropland regionally and globally?
- Will we be able to sustain our food supply in the years to come?
- What can we do as individuals and as a community to ensure a stable, secure food supply?

**Mark your calendar – and help spread the word!**  
deckert@tinnerhill.org

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On Tuesday evening, September 13, Mariette Hiu Newcomb will be one of two featured speakers at a special program on vanishing cropland and food security. The program, which is sponsored by the League of Women Voters of Falls Church, will begin at **7:30 p.m. at the Falls Church Community Center, 223 Little Falls Street.**

As the program chair of the LWVFC and a long-time CSA member, I would like to extend an invitation to you, your family, friends, and neighbors to come and hear a personal perspective on this very important topic from an experienced and knowledgeable source. Mariette Newcomb has been the owner of Potomac Vegetable Farms for the past 44 years – a time that has seen dramatic changes in agriculture in our region. She has also served as a mentor for other farmers both at home and abroad. Mariette’s commitment and tenacity are legendary, and her presentation promises to be informative and inspirational.

The second speaker is Janet Larsen, Research Associate of the Earth Policy Institute, a non-governmental research organization dedicated to providing a vision of an environmentally sustainable economy and a roadmap of how to get there. Janet will present a global view of the world’s diminishing food supply.

As we enjoy the bounty of our weekly bags of veggies, we are also helping to support and sustain local agriculture. I hope you will mark your calendar for September 13 and join me in learning even more about what we can do to sustain a healthy food supply – for our region and for the world.

Annette Mills  
703-248-5176

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**CSA Open House at the Vienna Farm**

Bring the whole family! Bring your friends!

**Potluck Dinner and Twilight Tour**  
**Sunday, September 4**  
**6 PM**

The farm will provide drinks, paper goods, and watermelon  
RSVP to Hana.Newcomb@cox.net

9627 Leesburg Pike  
Vienna VA 22182  
703-759-2119

Four miles west of Tysons Corner on Route 7. Coming from Tysons, make a U-turn at Middleton Ridge Road and a right into the farm. Park on Newcombs Farm Road.
There comes a time in every young farmer's life when he must yield to the inexorable exhortations of his craving core and venture valiantly beyond the cozy confines of his familiar farm into the wild world of exhilarating enlightenment. And in the case of Stephen Bradford the time is now and the setting is the grounds of UVA.

Having lived my entire life with the sanctuary of the farm as my home, the transition to the starkly contrasted college environment has proved a truly stirring experience. Potatoes, peppers and parsley have been replaced with a plethora of preppie people parading pedantically, pshaw. I suppose if I were to engage in a deep and profound emotional probing I would detect a conglomeration of chaotic and contrasted feelings, including (but by no means limited to) (listed in alphabetical order): A sensation of Anticipatory Excitement, as my eager little brain is tickled aggressively by a barrage of thrilling new stimulus; Bamboozled Befuddlement, as I search for a niche in an intimidating alien environment; Certain Anxiety, regarding the daunting academic schedule awaiting me, and; Zealous nostalgia as I remember the innocent and carefree days of frolicking in the fields at the farm.

While I couldn’t easily overstate the level of attachment I feel to the farm and the security it provides me (at least not without using a buncha long alliterative words) I manage to find some comfort in the knowledge that I have assuredly taken a bit of the farm with me.

Around in schools growing up taught me to embrace distinction rather than pursuing acceptance, allowing me to feel comfortable in a position of uniqueness. But it seems somewhat silly that what I gain most from the farm’s influence is the ability to feel secure with the distinction that it imposed upon me, so if you give me some time I’ll do my best to think of some better more objective life changing influences. Well, there’s the lesson inherent to organic produce: hard work and dedication will always yield a superior product despite the seductive appeal the short cuts offered by conventional methods. Or maybe it’s just that doing what’s right is always hardest. Ah, the disconnected musings of the sleep deprived college student.

Well, the point, I think, is something along the lines of the farm has always been my home, and will probably continue to fill this role in my life in some manner indefinitely. Who I am today is largely a function of the time I spent learning and growing on the farm, and in this way as far as I may travel from the farm it will always be a part of me.

Stephen’s First Final Farewell … until next year
Notes From the Field: Morning Meeting

For decades, we had “morning meeting” sitting at the picnic table in the front yard. Every morning, very early, Hiu went over the list and announced the assignments: “Kathy and Ann, cucumbers and squash at Parents. Becky and three others will pick Odricks One and Two tomatoes…” Sleepy workers would nod and get ready to go to the field or the stand.

Now we have morning meeting in our kitchen at the civilized hour of 8:00. While we eat our breakfast, I try to get the attention of the workers while they read comics and chat with each other. On a good day, there are six of them: Jesse, Stephen, Michael, Benjamin, Alissa, and Rebecca. The cousins/grandchildren – three are my sister’s boys and the other three are mine. The oldest is now 20 and the youngest is 13. They have been picking onions and filling CSA bags and working markets and running the stand together for many years now. And they still act as if they would rather be doing anything else, even though the routine is established and not open to debate. They never stop debating, of course.

This has been a wonderful time – for me. I love seeing these kids at work, and I love working with them. In spite of themselves, they have become very competent. I doubt any of them will end up farming, but they will all know how to work. In the next few weeks, the three oldest boys leave for college, and they won’t have to come to any more morning meetings until next summer.

I hope in the next twenty years or so there will be another generation of Newcomb children to sit down at morning meetings. It’s a good thought…I’ll be the grandma then. Great-grandma and I will train up another group of potential farmers.

The Doting Mother/Aunt

From top right, clockwise: Benjamin Groisser, 18, college freshman; Stephen Bradford, 18, college freshman; Alissa Groisser, 16, 11th grade; Michael Bradford, 14, 9th grade; Jesse Bradford, 20, college sophomore; and Rebecca Groisser, 13, 8th grade.