



Vol. 12 No. 12

November 7, 2011



POTOMAC VEGETABLE FARMS
www.potomacvegetablefarms.com
(703) 759-2119 ... Vienna
(540) 882-3885 ... Purcellville

What We Learned During Our First PVF Season

By Casey Gustowarow and
Stacey Carlberg

PHOTO BY ELLEN POLISHUK



The view from the first day of summer, five long months ago.

Weather can be very challenging. We could use some expletives to further describe the challenge, but we exhausted all of them while looking at the weather forecast throughout the season. In the first article Stacey wrote for the newsletter, she talked about how wet the spring was and how we had to alter our growing methods to cope. Besides a couple of hot, hot weeks in the middle (really seems like a blink of an eye), we

dealt with wet weather and early snow. Not only did this affect our field preparations, but also harvesting methods, transportation and overall coordination of the crew. Often our fields and roads were too wet for harvest, so we hooked up the tractor and wagon, lumbered slowly down the farm roads, dropping people off at different fields and then picked them up when they were done.

Growing for two farms is different than growing for one. This is something we hadn't thought about before the season or could even understand until we were in full harvest mode. There is a lot of shuffling of vegetables from PVF West to PVF East. And, there is a lot of shuffling of people from PVF East to PVF West. This has meant a lot of communication about what vegetables we have in surplus, what vegetables Hana could use for the shares and our staffing needs to get them all out of the fields. This also means a much larger crew on bigger harvest days – some Fridays, we'd have up to 14 people harvesting vegetables around the farm that would be sent to 5 different farmer's markets and 2 roadside stands. Keeping track

of all those people, making sure they know what to harvest and how to harvest it – then making sure it ends up on the right truck at the end of the day requires a lot of organization and patience. But, boy, at the end of the day, we always felt proud about the magnitude of the harvest and how many folks would be buying or receiving those vegetables.

Having a good crew is an art. It starts in January when applications start rolling in, and we select folks who can work hard, work well with others and want to learn about farming. Then, when we get all those people together, it takes some observation and management to keep things rolling smoothly. Our crew must live AND work together, so it's unlike a lot of other jobs. We think our workers know we're watching them work, but we're also watching them interact. If so-and-so talks too much or there seems to be a conflict arising, we try to switch up the teams working together in later tasks. We were fortunate to hire some great folks this year, but think a little daily observation from the management helps make it a success, too.

The Auxiliary Benefits of Farm Life

By Benjamin Groisser

Moving to a city after college gave me a new appreciation for some of the auxiliary benefits of farm life. Spatial constraints became manifestly apparent when I brought my motorcycle up to Boston. Though it was a small bike even the simplest maintenance task became an ordeal. Without even a parking space to work in, I was extremely lucky to have an indulgent aunt in Brookline who let me stash tools at her place and occupy her garage from time to time. Unfortunately my schedule usually required that I be able to ride the bike home after adjusting the valves or changing the brakes, which adds a certain degree of stress to a task as dusk begins to fall.

Contrast this with the project Stephen and I undertook this summer: preparing for a pan-American motorcycle tour, we went used bike shopping from craigslist ads. For better or worse neither one of us has a risk-averse personality, and Stephen has a serious soft spot for dilapidated BMWs. We came home with a rust-covered '85 K100, half of it in boxes.

I'll ruin the suspense by telling you that I'm writing this from Oberlin, OH, the first stop on our transcontinental odyssey, and the aged Beemer has a new lease on life. Hardly a forgone conclusion, if you'd seen the starting point.

Our first step in restoration was to occupy the greenhouse, spewing motorcycle parts and wrenches across counters usually devoted to flats of seedlings or (at the moment) curing sweet potatoes. In the process of rebuilding brakes, cleaning the cooling system, swapping out filters and generally replacing all the peripherals, we slowly transferred the contents of the barn's workshop into the greenhouse.

And that's where the magic happened. It quickly became apparent that what was already a challenging project (Dave, our preferred BMW mechanic, called it a "niveau 3" on the model-car scale) would have been completely infeasible without the farm's infrastructure. Cleaning fluids, oils and wrenches were readily at hand, not to mention Jim's drill press or the trucks we carted the crippled bike around in. I'd like to apologize to Dad for leaving behind half a dozen buckets of toxic sludge drained from various parts of the bike.

Of course the real advantage of being at PVF-

-and the reason we succeeded in departing before spring--was the expertise readily at hand, primarily in the form of my dad. Time and again I'd drag him out to the bike at 11 at night and we'd take out the water pump, or he'd help me check the thermostat on our kitchen stove.

In the same vein I'd like to give a shout out to Crystal, Mark Trader, Uncle Charles, and of course Bob's BMW shop. The bike had (has?) so many overlapping problems that our technical advisors can hardly be blamed for any inaccurate diagnoses, and every dead end led to a slightly better understanding of motorcycle mechanics. Besides, Stephen and I started out with such a rudimentary level of experience that any advice was critical; we simply could not have done it without our staff of experts.

So as usual, the farm provided a safe haven where we could build our dreams and prepare for the road ahead. Each of us had been away, Stephen in Guatemala and I trapped behind a desk in New England, but there's always been a place waiting for us in Virginia. Having a guaranteed landing zone makes it much easier to strike out for parts unknown, in large part simply by providing employment when it comes time to finance an excursion.

And I think our upbringing on the farm has prepared us for this sort of activity in other, less easily defined ways. Beyond our mechanical competence (such as it is) and a lack of antipathy for physical work, I think the people on the farm have given us a sense of our own resourcefulness and a taste for putting those abilities to the test. I'm looking forward to whatever lies ahead.



**Benjamin and Stephen with cousins
Hugh, Matilda and Ella in Denver.**

“First Season,” continued from Page 1

Our workers are watching us. For the first time, we are managing a farm together. So, we are learning how to run this farm together – which means we have to try to agree on standards and management styles. We are still learning each other’s styles, so we can accurately convey them to our crew. If we contradict each other,

our crew has taken to saying, “Well, Mom said this...” or “Dad said we could...” We usually defer to whatever instructions were already given – and then discuss later between ourselves.

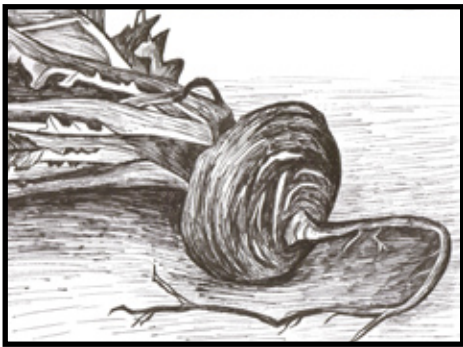
We have a lot to learn. So, we are really delighted that we ended up here. There is always a lot to learn in farming, as seasons are each so

different. But, there are decades of experience amongst the owners of PVF (Hiu, Hana and Ellen). So, we’re very lucky to be able to call them and ask about the strange thing we’ve noticed on a squash plant, how to deal with a worker issue or how to cure the sweet potatoes, etc. We look forward to learning more next year.

Preparing to Hibernate While Others Keep Working

By Hana Newcomb

We are three season farmers, even though the trend in “market gardening” seems to be moving toward year round growing. That is not for us. Last Saturday when our crews stood in the snow and rain at the Falls Church, Arlington Courthouse and Leesburg Farmers Market (we wimped out of going to Reston), we all affirmed our commitment to spending the winter indoors. Or if not indoors, on the road in search of non-vegetable adventure.



JESSICA WOOD

Once a farm decides to let that genie out of the bottle, using the winter for vegetable – and income – production, it is nearly impossible to stuff it back in. You invest in hoop houses and row cover and heaters and you discover that you actually need all that income. Sometimes

you breed your own hardy strains of greens that have proven to be resilient and delicious through the winter.

Year round farmers are noble and hard-working and committed. They enjoy the challenge of picking greens in the dead of winter, and finding new crops that can survive under snow. They also like the change of pace that comes during that quiet, slow growing time. Three season farmers like us are also noble and hard-working and committed, but we have promised ourselves a certain rhythm that includes a long hibernation. When we come home and unload that last market truck on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, we know we have reached the seasonal goal post. We can stop thinking about harvesting and marketing and field work and think other important thoughts (and sleep late).

I think that this is one of the secrets to our longevity as farmers. Like all full time farmers, during the growing season we are on duty six or seven days a week. We have strong batteries – healthy bodies and dependable constitutions – and we keep pushing straight through from the beginning to the end. We use December and

January and a good part of February to recharge those batteries. Those winter months give us an opportunity to devote some real time to growing the other parts of ourselves and get away from each other.

Stacey and Casey are hitting the road in mid-December, Carrie is looking forward to some serious movie and book time on the couch, Hiu always takes a big winter trip, Becky is moving off the farm to be closer to her sweetie, and I have already filled my calendar with all sorts of diversions.

We’ll be rested and ready for the new season. I already know that Stacey and Casey and Hiu will be chomping at the bit, ready to plant something as soon as the days start to get longer in February.



PHOTO BY JONATHAN GROISSER

Notes from Susan's Kitchen

By Susan Planck, retired farmer of Wheatland Vegetable Farms

(This is written in response to a request for her recipe for delicious greens with garlic and hot pepper.)

I chop a tall stack, a disorganized large handful of greens (mustard, turnip, kale, collards, or rape) on a cutting board so they are more or less in 4" x 4" pieces. I fill $\frac{3}{4}$ or more of an 8 qt stainless pot with the greens with two cups of water in the bottom. I cover, bring to steaming on high, and then reduce to just above low, maintaining steam, and set timer for exactly 8 minutes. I don't drain the little water that is left if we are eating them for dinner. I do drain if I am going to cool on a dinner plate and freeze in bags, two cups per bag. We freeze a couple of bushels of greens each fall. Those bags are then ready to thaw, reheat, and season.

I had forgotten about garlic and hot pepper! Usually we just put on olive oil and (unrefined) sea salt. Last night and the week before, I put on pastured pig lard instead. We have never like under or overcooked greens from the mustard family. Undercooked, they are still bright green, and tough. Overcooked, they are an overcooked-green color and have a strong, overcooked smell. Cooked exactly right they are a stunning in-between green color and delicious. Unrefined sea salt -- best brand is Celtic Sea Salt -- is

85% sodium chloride and 15% trace minerals instead of 100% sodium chloride, delicious and nutritious.

We love hot peppers. The rice I cooked yesterday had what I always put in it. Two large cloves of hard neck garlic minced and set aside in a small dish of two tablespoons of olive oil. No more than $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of our own dried cayenne peppers -- thoroughly dried and then chopped in the blender and stored in a jar -- added to the oil, and a teaspoon or more of grated fresh ginger, or fresh ginger that I store in the freezer whole and grate frozen. When the rice is done-- two cups organic brown rice, four cups water, and two teaspoons coarse sea salt in a second 8 qt pot -- in about an hour -- I add a tablespoon or two of coconut oil. We love the taste on rice, baked or mashed potatoes, porridge, pancakes, and popcorn, it is a traditional fat, and it has antiviral qualities. We get it online from Wilderness Family Naturals for about \$60 a gallon and use about a gallon a year. The hot rice melts the coconut oil, and then I pour in the contents of the small bowl.

We also cut up and dice bigger varieties of hot peppers, with seeds removed, and freeze, about a tablespoon per packet of cling wrap. And we have on hand store bought ground cayenne. One of the packets can go into the rice, or $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon of the ground cayenne, instead of our blender chopped dried cayenne.

PHOTO BY JESSE BRADFORD

How to Sign Up for CSA 2012

We will send you an e-mail on February 1, giving you the link to the registration page. If you don't hear from us on that day, please check your spam box or write to us. Returning customers get a head start on signing up, and we open up the CSA to new members on February 15. We do not reserve spaces or keep a waiting list, so please mark a calendar if you know you want to be in the CSA next year. Some of our pickup locations sell out quickly.

