



Farm Notes

CSA Newsletter

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I Am Really Going to Run My Own Farm!

by Pam Jones

Just over a year ago, my husband and I bought a parcel of land in Loudoun County with the intention of moving out of the city. We wanted to have enough land to grow some food and raise some livestock on a small scale -- sustenance farming or homesteading level! I had secretly dreamed of starting a sustainable agriculture enterprise on the land but was very overwhelmed at the prospect - how could someone with no real experience possibly start up a business in agriculture? I limited my goals to 'feed the family'.

In search of skills, I applied for a job at PVF. From my very first day, this has been so much more than a job. It has been an education as well. I was helping to grow, care for and harvest vegetables I had never even eaten before. It fed my hunger to find out more about our food system and inspired me to take more responsibility over my food choices. I now try to eat more seasonally and understand the true cost of what is on my plate. Part of that has been the realization that eating 'locally' and supporting my local ag community was one of the best ways to lower my negative impact on the world - calculating how many 'calories' of oil it took to get my avocado salad

from Mexico to Virginia in January was alarming!

Working among so many intelligent, passionate and resourceful individuals from all walks of life has opened up my eyes to the possibility that maybe it can be done. Learning about the history of PVF and its inception is proof of that! If you don't know the story of PVFs beginnings, you should really go and watch the video on the website potomacvegetablefarms.com and read the story of how this place came to be.

Now the desire of running my own farm is no longer a secret and no longer a dream! I have been galvanized to strive for that goal, and working at the farm introduced me to my good friend and soon to be farming partner, Sarah. So now, instead of small scale, sustenance farming, we are looking at larger scale, agricultural enterprise that will use the skills we are both learning at PVF to grow produce, maybe involve some livestock and also develop an educational element so we can, in turn, pay it forward and teach the next generation of budding young wannabe farmers.

It is easy to think of the practical ways that working at the farm has prepared me to run my own farm one day, but the lesson that will stick with me is the magnanimous

approach that our awesome lady-bosses have towards helping Sarah and me with farming plans. I am sure Hana and Carrie will eventually tire of the constant stream of questions, some of them experiential like "Why do you string tomatoes that way?", and some of it more reflective, such as "What doesn't work about this system?". Maybe they are already tired, but you would never know! And unfortunately for them, they are stuck with us now. This lesson, that our local farming community is so generous with knowledge and willing to share it with the new kids on the block, makes me have confidence to step boldly into this exciting new chapter knowing that decades of knowledge is just a text message away.



Education and Arts: Our Roots Grow Deeper and Stronger

by Sophia Maravell

For over 50 years this farm has been the fertile ground for innovation in sustainable agriculture, community and alternative living. This year I am proud to be joining the farm as it is taking steps to deepen those commitments. I have long admired Hiu, Hana and Carrie for their defining leadership in our local food movement, and so I was immediately interested when the invitation came from Stephen and Julia to join the PVF crew and collaborate with them on coordinating more community education, arts and outreach programming through a lens of racial, social and ecological justice within PVF. While it may seem unusual for a farm to have three people working at least part of their time on social justice, arts and education programming, the leadership at PVF has long understood these values as central to the farm's culture.

Our first such project has been to turn our attention inward, to focus on ourselves before trying to make any changes. Early this spring we

held 'worker culture' meetings to talk about intentions for the upcoming farm season and how to create a work and life culture that was harmonious with our collective needs. Subsequently, as an organization, we have been engaging in a process of reflection and self-examination around questions of race and racism in the food system. We are continuing to meet monthly to discuss how racial justice relates to our work in the world on an individual and collective level. In April many PVF employees joined thousands of other individuals from across the county to participate in a 21 day Racial Equity Challenge hosted by Food Solutions New England.

We will also be incorporating this approach to understanding our role in the food system into our evolving educational curricula here on the farm, starting with 'Root to Rise', a week-long farm-based leadership program for young women ages 14-18. We are excited to explore how art, theater, song, dance, crafts, history, nature skills, cooking and critical thinking can all be developed naturally on a farm in a way that

enhances one's connection to self, to others and to the land. We were inspired by all of the strong female farmer role models here at PVF so it feels natural to start a program for young women. We are still accepting applications at potomacvegetablefarms.com/r2rapplication or email me for more information: sophia@potomacvegetablefarms.com

To support these initiatives PVF has committed the half-acre garden at the Purcellville stand to be cultivated as a space of learning and collaboration. With many volunteers and the PVF workers out here in Loudoun, we have already transformed the space beautifully, planting many fruit trees and berries, building a bamboo trellis tunnel, creating a living amphitheater lined with plants, and designing multiple educational and contemplative garden spaces.

And finally we hope to bring the conversation around all these new initiatives to you, our CSA members.. We look forward to having you as an active member of our community!



We are building a magical garden for educational and community gatherings.

Chickens Need Sunshine and Bugs

by Jesse Straight,
Whiffletree Farm

Last Monday I left the house at 5am to drive to central Pennsylvania to bring our chicken scalder (a machine that helps pluck the chickens' feathers) back to Eli Reiff for repairs. Nine years ago, before I had ever raised a single meat chicken, full of happy enthusiasm, and NOT full of knowledge or experience, I made the same trip to buy this scalder from Eli.

Eli is a wonderful and very endearing firecracker of a man--lots of jokes and teasing and buddy-buddy with everyone who comes to the farm, combined with slightly-off-the-wall-curmudgeonly declarations. He is also part of an old order Mennonite community--no cars, no cell phones, no computers, no TV's, no public schooling, families are close together, wear simple clothing, lots of clothes lines, gardens, bicycles and horses.

I spent most of Monday there. I had to drop off the scalder and wait about 5 hours for it to get fixed. In the meantime I got to see a bit about this wonderful Mennonite community and talk with a number of the people. I got to have good talks with a 15 year old young man, a young husband and wife, Eli and more of his buddies, plus observe the 1 room school house



bustling with cheery kids (with a "parking lot" full of bicycles!) that was on the farm.

It was very compelling. It looked very happy. A lot of what I want for my life and my family's life; and a good, fresh perspective on the complicated, fast-paced life around all of us.

The other interesting thing I saw was many of the confined poultry houses like the one in this photo. One of the farms I was on had a couple large houses like this. They had raised chickens for a conventional company, but now had switched

to raising chickens for an organic company. Same houses; one day conventional, next day organic. I knew about how industrial "organic" chicken is just raised in the same environment as the conventional chickens (except with organic feed and no antibiotics), but it was different to see it in person like this. This, right here, is where those industrial "organic" chickens come from in the grocery store. Never go outdoors, never see a blade of grass or bug, without the fresh air and sunshine. Raised

just like a conventional chicken. And of course, I am thinking about this in reference to the lives our chickens live.

Many are not aware that the "organic" chickens from the grocery store or the major food suppliers are raised in confined houses like these. It is deceptive to lead people to imagine one thing, when another thing is the reality--pictures of chickens in grass, or using the phrase "free-range" when that actually means they can freely range the concrete floor of the barn, etc. "Organic" doesn't mean what people think it means.

So coming off of this firsthand look at industrial organic chicken farming, I am going to begin a Facebook series for you: Life of Our Chickens! I will walk you through from chick to packaged chicken or egg how we raise our birds and how it is good for the birds, the land, and you!



This is where commercially grown "organic" chickens live. Very crowded with none of the basic joys of the chickens' life. No light, air, bugs, grass.

Kicking It Up a Notch on Tuesdays

by Ciara Prencipe

At PVF, we have a lot of practices. Agricultural practices, of course, but the farm's culture also encourages other practices; teamwork, curiosity, and community are a few that come to mind. The past few years, we've been practicing community through weekly potlucks, and this year we decided to kick it up a notch to yet another weekly communal lunch. Tuesdays, sometime between 10:30 and 11, two volunteers from the crew leave the field work to go make lunch for everyone. Usually the crew on Tuesdays is 10+ people, so it's kind of a huge undertaking!

When I first heard this proposal, I thought it was a nice idea, but totally unrealistic. Surely we had way too much to do for that to be practical, I thought. I also thought

that I would never be the one to cook lunch, because I'd be way too busy. I've since been proved wrong on both accounts - I'm cooking for communal lunch a second time tomorrow.

The first Tuesday we tried this, it was a cold and windy sort of day in late March. We ate at a farm house, instead of at the barn, just to stay warm. There were about 10 people there, and I even brought my dog. The moment I walked in the door, I changed my mind

about these lunches. Not to exaggerate, but that lunch felt a little magical, coming in from the blustery weather to a cozy house, with all my coworkers, and sitting down to a family-style meal together. The cooks made a baked bean and spinach dish (PVF spinach, of course!) with rice, and lots of hot tea, and a delicious salad.

In the weeks since, salad, rice, and some kind of bean dish have become staples at these lunches, and we also get

to try different styles of cooking and different vegetables we're growing, depending on who's cooking that week. One of my favorites was a spanakopita, made with homemade dough, stinging nettles, and a whole lot of love. Indian-style dishes also lend themselves well to this type of lunch. Tomorrow I'm making roasted potatoes, beets, carrots, and garlic scapes, some of which I harvested and chopped the night before. When I think about my trepidation, it was because I was so sure we'd have too much to do to have two people leave to cook for everyone, but the reality is, we rarely get everything done on our to do list. All it took to add this into our system was a little bit of prioritization and planning, and luckily, lots of great cooks in our crew.



New Ideas Pouring in Over the Transom

by Hana Newcomb

Several times a week, someone sends us a new thought on how we could put our farm to good use. Mothers write to ask if we hire children. Sometimes they write to ask if they can just drop off their children and pick them up later. (No.) People want to sell furniture in our front parking lot. Or coffee. (No and no.) They ask if they can park their trucks on our land. (Only if you have something good to trade.) This spring a couple of high school students decided this would be a good place to do their senior

project (this time we said yes). A CSA customer asked if we could take a volunteer for a few weeks, a young man who is visiting from Poland (he starts tomorrow). A young entrepreneur wondered if we might be able to take on interns from business school (a possibility). A teacher in China wants to bring his class to work for two days while they are touring in the area (we are working on this one).

I am not sure why we have suddenly become such a magnet for all these unsolicited inquiries. But they are obviously finding us on the internet, and our website

must make them feel like they can just ask. We do say no quite often, but occasionally a truly great idea comes in and we are glad.

In the old days we relied on word of mouth to find our workers; now they find us by googling for a farm. We've learned to sort for the ones who are most likely to succeed, or most interesting - being visible on the internet has helped us to connect with a stream of wonderful future tomato pickers, and some future farmers.

All in all, the pile of successful ideas is at least as big as the pile of duds. We'll keep the transom open.