Farm Notes

CSA Newsletter

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Potomac Vegetable Farms
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Technology, Experimentation and Innovation on the Farm

Cameras, Email, Front End Loader

By Dick Clement

Emails with photographs provide a special means of communicating. I've taken photographs with my Cannon camera, forwarded them to workmates, also to Hana who has included them in CSA newsletters and her slideshow. The forwarding capabilities of photos taken with an iPhone are magical, spur of the moment expressions. Olivia at her first potluck; Jess's caterpillar; Sandy Schaefer's (CSA customer) "fun at the farm" photo, which she could and did place on Facebook. Endless possibilities. My own reference point is a roll of film turned in for development at a local drug store to be returned when developed.

Does anyone but me remember that? Now, it's take a photo, send it anywhere instantly. Talk about technology.

Technology on the farm is everywhere. Most recently for me, I was invited onto the loader. "Dick, we are going to train you to run the loader." "Turn the key, lock yourself in, here are the controls. Good luck." Now that was a fun day, among many at PVF

An example of a photo that is sent in an instant, every day from the farm.

Another example of beauty photographed on the farm

It's All An Experiment

By Ciara Prencipe

One of my favorite PVF-isms is "it'll be an experiment." Hana and Carrie both use this phrase regularly, especially in the spring. Did you order the wrong variety of eggplant, or accidentally plant the tomatillos at a spacing that's too wide, or did the last planting of squash come out of the greenhouse too late? Generally, the answer is "that's ok, it'll be an experiment!"

When I hear that phrase, I hear so, so many subtexts. The first and most important one is that we're not just farming the same way every year - if we try something new and it works, we'll add it to our repertoire.

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It's All An Experiment, *Continued from Page 1*

Winter growing is an experiment every year. We just laid the plastic that will grow onions for the very early spring. It might work

If it doesn't, well, at least we tried. There are so many variables in farming - timing, spacing, variety, soil, weather, markets, you name it - that you can't always necessarily say something won't work, and if we're past the point of no return (like, the plant is in the ground), it's sometimes best to just wait and see.

The hardest part can be remembering at the end of the season what exactly you did so you can remember for next year!

Another piece of this little phrase is a graceful acceptance of the daily mistakes we all make. Hana and Carrie tend to hire and work with a lot of first year workers, and it's very hard to keep all of the relevant details in your head no matter how long you've been doing this. For me, on my 5th year here, it feels like I haven't had a day on the farm where I didn't make at least one mistake, be it big or small, agriculturally, interpersonally… the list goes on. It's a good reminder that if you didn't do any real damage, you're just not sure if something is going to work, then that, my friends, can be an experiment! ."

Farm From a Box

By Katherine Collins of Arcadia Farm

This season, Arcadia Farm (in Alexandria, VA) was lucky enough to receive a grant from NBC News which allowed us to buy a very fancy farm kit called Farm from a Box. We had been in conversations with the company's founders since our initial production farming season in 2016. Much of our interest had to do with the fact that when we arrived on site, we were completely off the grid.

Since then, we have drilled a well and are using separate solar panels to power our well and heat our greenhouse. Simultaneously, however, the grant came through to fund the Farm from a Box purchase and the timing worked out well as we will have the four incubator farm businesses using this off-grid tool kit as their hub in order to keep our organization's systems separate from our farmer trainees.

The modified shipping container comes with a walk-in cooler, a top of the line water pump, Wifi, tech capabilities to remotely check on field moisture and the ability to turn irrigation on and off using a phone app – all of these functions are powered by solar panels.

While the box arrived toward the end of the season, our incubator farmers are very interested in putting this new tool through its paces next season!

Google to the Rescue

By Jess Zielinski

As an aspiring farmer, one thing that really bolsters my confidence and elicits the warm-fuzzies is the ability to answer knowledgably on most topics in my agricultural wheelhouse. A dinner with family or friends can suddenly feel like a panel discussion, with a succession of questions flying my way about why and when and how to prune tomato plants for example. Confident in my experience with such, I send each answer sailing out of the park with crystal clear and compelling explanations to the tune of the crowds', "Ooooohhhhhhhh" and, "How interesting" and "I'm excited to try that!" However, the prefix 'aspiring' afore 'farmer' also means I will spend equal if not more time standing before questions with the most ineloquent of answers... "uuuhhmm."

Google probably needs this photo

One place where I am sure to engage in Q&A is at the stand, where customers are hunting among the produce for just the right items to build their breakfast, lunch, and dinner menus. Some customers often are returning to refill on what they always get, while others are branching out in unknown taste territory. And then come the waves of questions: What is this? What does it taste like? How is it cooked? Which do you like better? To which I often respond, "uuuhhhhhmm...."

On the occasions when there is no hurry at the stand's checkout register, and I've been asked yet another stumper, I'll pull up Google on my phone and start searching, angling the phone for both of us to see. For instance, once a customer asked, "What does quince taste like?", as it was included in one of the McCutcheon's preserves. Quince? I'm not entirely sure how to pronounce it, let alone know what it even looks like or tastes like. But Google came through, and the customer and I both learned that quince tastes like a cross between an apple and a pear when prepared as a preserve, but it is generally not eaten raw unless you really, REALLY like tartness. In true Google fashion, we could have read on and on about all things quince, alas it was on to the next task. I have to tell you, the most popular question I have receive by far this fall at the stand is, "Which apple is crispest or best to bake with?" Turns out that Honeycrisp and Granny Smith are crispy and great to bake with, while Gala and Red Delicious are best eaten raw, and Golden Delicious and Cortland, while not crisp, are great baked, raw in salads, and cooked down in sauces. With Google at our fingertips, we can answer all the questions while also checking the weather forecast and watching each other's progress as we travel between farms!

Innumerable Variables in Planting Carrots and Spinach

By David Giusti of Second Spring Farm

August 13 -- Something I love about farming year after year is that past experience allows me to perceive ever greater levels of detail in the process of farming, offering the possibility of making ever more precise decisions in order to effect the desired outcome. An outcome like having spinach or carrots, for example. And spinach and carrots are two things I've been thinking a lot about these past few weeks.

In my early years of farming I read the seed catalog, picked a planting date, dialed in the seeding rate, and hoped for the best. This was met with mixed success. Even though we assume seeds will germinate into plants with some regularity, there is much that holds them back, and so naively setting the seeder according to the book and running it on the proper planting date may or may not yield a good crop in any given season.

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Innumerable Variables, *Continued from Page 4*

It was only after examining the failures of many past seasons and comparing the conditions and results in the present instance with the conditions and results of previous trials that I could begin to tease apart the innumerable variables of these quite uncontrolled experiments. And in the classic way of "the more you know, the more there is to know," I do enjoy being able to juggle these micro-level details and make my best gamble about how to provide the optimum conditions required.

I last planted carrots a few weeks ago, before the big rain, which I thought would be better than waiting until after, especially since if they didn't work I'd still have time to re-plant. Carrots need constant moisture to emerge (so two weeks of rain is great!) but they are quite wimpy and liable to stall out pushing their way up through firm soil, germinating successfully but never making it to the surface. Water makes the soil soft, but lots of rain compacts and settles the soil into a firm mass--a firm mass that requires even more water to loosen, which will dry and harden on the slightest sunny day. Planting shallowly offers a shorter path to the surface, but it dries out quicker up near the sun and germination can suffer. It's also hotter near the surface--though afternoon irrigation can cool the soil.

On Wednesday I made my gambles with the last carrot planting and first spinach planting, both critical crops, and I enjoyed every minute of seeding-rate calculation with math and measuring spoons to settle on a rate that might be high enough for a reliable stand but low enough to limit the work of thinning, setting the depth (shallow) and planning to irrigate frequently--but lightly--and waiting until these cooler days which, however, have a higher chance of blasting thunderstorms that can pound the loose soil into crusty cement in an instant.

Whether all this effort and consideration will have the desired effect I do not know. And if the seeds do emerge, exactly at the right spacing, can I attribute the success to my care and precision? Who can say. Certainly I will have no idea which variable was the critical factor, although I might guess. Many years from now perhaps the trends will be clearer, and if the success rate continues to rise, only then might they hint at a causal relationship. Until that time comes I'll continue to pay attention and do my best, and enjoy every minute of it.

(October 25 update – the carrots grew beautifully. The spinach germinated as hoped, but then drowned in the weeks of rain that followed.)]

Innovations Observed on a Tour Around the Farm

By David Smythe

- Protecting crops, extending seasons, working efficiently, always making sure the tool matches the job:
- Huge deer fences around the growing areas that only Santa's reindeer could clear.
- Growing produce in weatherproof hoop houses for season extension and disease control.
- Using smaller containers as spacers to prevent larger containers getting stuck in each other.
- Feeding chickens and pigs with surplus or spoiled produce before it becomes valuable compost.
- Using drip tapes to efficiently and accurately water crops.
- A thriving CSA program with a built-in customer base for each growing season.
- Growing flowers close to beehive colonies and to add eye candy and attract pollinators to vegetable plots.
- Using golf carts to transport harvested produce to the washing, packing and storage areas efficiently and joyfully.
- Growing plants under porous polyester covers to reduce insect infestation and offset harsh weather.
- Using a fleet of Little Red Wagons to move produce around the Stand.