

Farm Notes

CSA Newsletter

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Potomac Vegetable Farms
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So Long Summer

By Nina Marie Stewart

Fall is a woman that I wait for all year and am always upset to see her go, my favorite season for sure. As a kid my favorite holiday was Halloween, the excitement of dressing up and getting candy fulfilled a big portion of my childhood. As I got older I started to notice the beauty of her, when the leaves started to change and the cool breezy nights started to blow in. When someone mentions Fall the first thing I think of is the crisp clean air with a subtle wind.

For the past 10 years my cousin and I have enjoyed her presence at the Waterford Fair, which has turned into a tradition for us. Always the first week of October really denotes Fall for me. It seems to always be the first chilly week of the year, sweater weather, which is what I live for. She graces me with pumpkins as well, for what reason I



The ritual of Fall CSA customers and their great pumpkin.

can't explain but they give me immense joy, possibly the true representation of Fall in a plump round orange tasty Cucurbita. Fall is the best time of the year for me, she never disappoints.



The Vienna Farm Stand in the Fall.

First Fall Fruit: A Cold Asian Pear

By Amani Greene

Each time I bite into an Asian pear, I remember getting off the bus from elementary school. I grew up in Blueberry Hill, the neighborhood next to the farm. At that point, my neighborhood's bus stop was at the stand's sign on Route 7 and the road went through the farm, as there was still an orchard on the other side of my neighborhood. I would walk down to the stop with the rest of my neighbors every morning and then we would spend some time at the stand once we got home.

When we got off the bus, I would run over to the farm stand and greet Darryl. Darryl was a farm fixture until he passed away several years ago. When I was growing up, his arrival was an important sign of fall for me. Darryl would work the stand once all of the high school and college-age workers went back to school. Every day he would ask if I was learning anything interesting and I would tell him about what I had learned as I ate an Asian pear.

The Asian pears are some of the first fall fruits we get at the stand. Unlike the apples and other pears we sell, I don't remember seeing them in a grocery store when I was younger. Over the years, I've had many conversations with customers about how the fruit we sell tends to be sweeter and more flavorful. I know that the Asian pears we sell are delicious and juicy, but that's not the best part. The best part about the pears is the way they are nice and crisp when they come out of the cooler. Biting into a cold pear with a satisfying crunch as the juice fills my mouth takes me back to memories of crisp air, trees filled with fall colors, cider, and pumpkins. It signals that fall is on its way.

Making Cider

By Hana Newcomb

This weekend, Jon will clean up the cider press and wash the cloths and make the first cider of the season. Like everything else this year, that is about two weeks earlier than usual. The blueberries came and went two weeks earlier, as did the tomatoes. I wonder what will happen when we get to Thanksgiving – will there be a gap because everything ends two weeks ahead of schedule?

That won't happen because we have an unusual amount of food stashed in the coolers. For the first time ever in September, we still have onions to clean. We still have crates of garlic stacked in the secret room. And we have never had such a tower of potato crates filling the back corner of the tomato cooler. We feel like happy squirrels.

Anyway, Jon will use the power washer to remove the dust and spiders from the machinery. He will spray off the special boards that support the stack of apple mush sandwiches, and he will make sure the hammermill is greased and ready to go. He will drive to Winchester to get the apples from Marker Miller Orchard and he will be ready to make juice on Saturday morning, if all goes well.

My father bought this hydraulic press in about 1980 from a small orchard in Massachusetts. The story was that the family ran the press around the clock, making 50 gallons of juice an hour. A 12 year old boy had a night shift, running the machine all by himself. At our farm, we almost always do tasks in pairs – even though at other farms those tasks are often done by one person.



Cider blanket ready for the mush to come down.

There is one family that has never missed a season in over 30 years, coming to help Jon make cider – when Jesse first came he was just two years old. Now he is a grown man who owns a house of his own, but he still comes in his rubber boots every October to be part of this autumn ritual. His dad brings rum, and the three of them work the press and spend a lot of time visiting while bottling cider.

In the last 40 years, Jon has replaced most of the parts on this machine. We order more cloths and boards from the orchard supply company from time to time. He built a new screen to filter the juice. He had to put a new set of knives in the mill when the other ones got too worn down. He even sewed a new chute when the original one finally disintegrated. Both the hammermill motor and the conveyor belt motor have been replaced. The old cast iron bathtub has never worn out and the hydraulic motor seems to be indestructible. The little whiny pump that sucks the cider from the holding tank up to the barrel seems like it will last forever too.

My dad used to cut a little square hole in the bottoms of the wooden bins of apples so we could pull the apples out and drop them into the bathtub. Jon has built a large plywood spout that he attaches to the top of the bin instead – he lifts the bulk bin with a front end loader and tips it so the apples pour out the top. Those bins don't belong to us, so this seems like a better long term solution.

After the apples have had their bath, the guys scoop them out of the tub and onto the conveyor which carries them up about seven feet and drops them into the hammermill (like a huge blender). In batches, the apples get smashed to smithereens and the mush drops down through the chute into

the waiting blanket that is draped over a square form which sits on top of a larger square board made of slats. When the mush fills up the form, Jon turns off the mill and folds the blanket over the top, leaving a tidy square package of chewed up apples. He takes off the square form, puts another board on top of the blanket, puts the form on the next layer, pulls a new blanket over the form and starts over.

When there are seven apple sandwiches in the tower, they drag the whole stack (which sits in a stainless steel pan that has wheels on the bottom) across to the press and turn on the hydraulic motor. Slowly the whole stack rises until the top board touches the metal ceiling and the juice begins to squeeze through the blankets. The stack gets squished to about half its height as the juice pours into the pan, and then down into the holding tank. The whiny pump sucks the juice up the tube and into the plastic barrel that sits up high so the juice can flow down through the manifold and into the jugs.

Each stack is about 5 bushels of apples, which comes to about 250 pounds of mush. Out of that stack comes 15 gallons, which translates to about 135 pounds of juice. The rest is dry pomace, which is tasty to the pigs for about a day. Then it goes to the compost pile.

The juice tastes better than any other cider, partly because it has so much body. It's not very heavily filtered (going through some blankets and one screen) and the many apple varieties combine into a full, multi-flavored drink. After a couple of weeks, the juice will begin to ferment and get fizzy, which is a whole other level of deliciousness.



Cider stack getting squeezed.

For the last forty years on this farm, cider has provided the background flavor of fall. We only make it from the end of September to the end of October, so it is a true seasonal treat. Make sure to get some!

Zen Farming

By Michael Bradford



Beans that practically pick themselves.

When the mind is calmed there is only breath, only the beans. They come off the plant in rhythm: *snap, snap, snap*. The rhythm demands satisfaction, so the eyes must always be looking ahead to the next beans, trusting the hands to work without direct supervision. A thought captivates me for a moment and the beans skip a beat, jolting me back to reality. There I find my breath, and more beans. My basket is always full.

"It takes a simple mind to drive a tractor," Hana told me once, "and I mean that in the best way. I have a simple mind." I look inward and wonder if I'm up to the task. Can I sit for hours, watching a machine run through the soil, without being tortured by my own thoughts? It's a simple task, but simple is not common and in that way it's not easy.

A weed is a thought, the crop is my breath. How am I relating to them? Does summer have to be this overwhelming? As I approach the bed of carrots in meditation I know that if I give every weed the attention it wants the carrots will never see the sun. The weeds are deceptive: they tell us they're in charge while they hide something beautiful. I look instead at the carrots, at each little stem. The plants excite me and sustain me. I want to see more. Without a plan, without effort, I notice my hands have subdued all of the weeds around the little group of carrots in front of me. The carrots shake in the breeze and I smile back before moving on.

The Best and the Weirdest

By Foster Gettys

Fall is undeniably upon us. And after the long hot marathon that is Summer I'm delighted and energized by the cooler weather and fall color just beginning to appear around me. A trip to the store today confirmed that I'm not the only one feeling the change. This sign reminded me of my deep love and appreciation for the earnest, silly, and sometimes just ridiculous way we choose to name the sights, smells, and sounds of the season. And these sights, smells, and sounds are truly inspiring of the imagination. Some of the best and weirdest looking squashes appear in the fall, for example, and with them, some of the best and weirdest names. In honor of fall and all its glory I present a list of the best and worst squash variety names in the rare seed catalog I peruse sometimes just for fun.

Best

1. Giant Show King - fantastical name: regal quality, communicates a clear and certain victory if you want to one up your neighbors' size contest entries at the county fair. The pumpkin for those who live by the motto 'go big or go home'.
2. Candy Roaster - with a name like that I'm sure these seeds sell themselves, really activates my sweet tooth
3. Lady Godiva - for fans of the legend of lady Godiva. this name is great because it's inspired by the hulled, 'naked seeds' of this pumpkin variety. Creative!



Fantasy pumpkin sign.

Worst

1. Boston Marrow - an uncomfortably anatomical name for an uncomfortably large and ugly winter squash.
2. Long Island Cheese - kind of a great name but this squash apparently doesn't even taste like cheese. Talk about false advertising!
3. Red Warty Thing - this is a real name for a real variety of squash. Honestly couldn't decide which category it belonged to! Truly the best worst name.

Talking Squash

By Katy Craley

In 2016 I managed three acres of vegetable production in Woodinville, Washington, for a family business well established in the eastern part of the state. Out there you have dry, hot summer days, perfect for the orchards, melons, tomatoes and peppers the soils produced, but they needed some help with the more mild and wet climate of western Washington. My boss wanted to me to explore what crops would do best in the compost-like, mucky wet soils they had started to lease, so we grew a little bit of a lot of things, except for winter squash. In June we planted

almost two acres of squash babies and watched them suck up the moisture and fruit like heck. In



Galeux D'Eysines squash.

September, we had 22 (or more?) varieties to cut and collect in a

blessing of a sunny warm window before the fall rains came.

Butternuts, hubbards, kuris, acorns, yes, but also sweet meats, long island cheeses, blue bananas and kabochas. And the strangest of all: the Galeux D'Eysines. A massive, peachy-salmon-skinned bounty of squash. Covered, completely in some cases, with tough "warts" protruding about an inch from the skin. They look a lot like peanut shells, and are most commonly an indicator of sugar content, though they can form if the skin is dented or scratched. Like an anti-predator evolutionary trait, be advised: it's delicious.