Notes from the Field: Weeds

In his remarkable book, *Epitaph for a Peach*, David Masumoto writes eloquently about his peach orchard’s transition from conventional to organic management. He describes in vivid detail how the evolution of the farm transforms the orderly rows of peach trees and turf into a tangled and lively mass of cover crops and trees, insects and birds. Passersby, used to the pristine agricultural landscape that Masumoto’s father managed for decades, are shocked by the orchard’s condition. They slow down as they pass the farm, and some even turn in the driveway and appear at the farmhouse door, hats in hand, to ask Masumoto’s wife solemnly if the farmer has died.

You may be wondering the same thing these days as you walk around the farm. June-heading-into-July is one of the most challenging times of the season on an organic farm. Our harvests, as you’ve no doubt noticed, are growing and are taking up a good deal of our time. Meanwhile, the long days and perfect temperatures are encouraging weeds to grow as fast as—and often faster than—the crops. We literally watched lamb’s quarter grow in the fields from one evening to the next morning last week. The crops that we have covered with reemay (that ever-present white row cover) to hide them from the flea beetles are particularly hard-hit by the weeds. Crops that spend a long time in the field, like leeks and onions, also have to compete with a lot of weed pressure. Pathways, field edges, and cover-cropped areas can be great places for weeds to grow. The fact that our fields are surrounded by other non-agricultural areas that we don’t manage means that weed seed can (and does!) grow in those areas and blow or hitchhike in among our vegetables. And the fact that our farm began years ago without a full-time manager means that those weeds had plenty of time to grow, flower and seed themselves right where we’d like to plant our crops.

Weeds can be vigorous, dynamic and interesting. They can be good indicators of fertility—or fertility problems—in the field. If we turn them under, they can add organic matter to the soil and help prevent the leaching of valuable nutrients. As our Greek and Italian neighbors have shown us all spring, many are edible and very nutritious. Still, they continue to confound us with their stubborn refusal to conform to our ideas of what a farm should look like. Peaceful rows of lettuce and tomatoes give way, in June, to exuberant waves of shepherd’s purse and lamb’s quarter, the purple flowers of veronica, and the cross-hatched roots of encroaching grasses. The worst part about weeds, of course, is that they compete with crop plants for nutrients, water, and sunlight. They shade our crops so that they’re pale and spindly, too tender for the sunlight that hits when they’re weeded. They can provide safe haven for pests and diseases of our crop plants. And they reproduce so successfully that if the saying “one year of seed, seven years of weed” is an accurate indicator of how many years of weed seed we are facing in our fields—well, we don’t even really want to think about it.

We do have organic methods for dealing with weeds. Our tractor cultivation is useful on annual weeds, like lamb’s quarter (do I keep mentioning it? I wonder why…) and amaranth, but not so helpful on the grass that has enveloped our strawberries. Our backpack flame weeder, which we use to hit small weeds after we direct seed a crop and before it emerges from the soil, is hard-pressed to deal with the weed pressure on our farm this spring, but it does make a difference. Our valiant volunteers, with hoes and on hands and knees, are perhaps the best defense against the weeds. Still, this time of year, it is hard to see that our efforts make a dent in their zealous growth. No, we haven’t died—we’re still out there cultivating, hoeing, and hand-weeding. As the days begin to shorten, the weed growth will slow and we’ll be able to breathe again. In the meantime, all we can really do is admire the growth of the weeds and hope that they provide an example to our crops!

The Farm Crew
Chard Gratin
(from Local Flavors by Deborah Madison)

2 pounds chard, including half of the stems
(Add other tender greens if you don’t have enough chard.)
4 Tbsp butter
1 onion, finely chopped
salt and pepper
1 cup fresh bread crumbs
1 garlic clove, minced
3 Tbsp chopped dill or parsley
1 Tbsp flour
1 cup milk or cream or a mixture of cream and stock
1 cup crumbled fresh goat cheese or grated cheddar

Coarsely chop the chard. Melt 2 Tbsp butter in
wide skillet over medium heat. Cook onion and
chard stems, stirring occasionally, until onion has
begun to brown. Add the chard leaves, sprinkle
with salt, and cook until wilted and tender, about
10 minutes.

Meanwhile, preheat oven to 400˚F and
lightly oil a 2-quart baking dish. Melt half the
remaining butter in a small skillet and add the
bread crumbs, garlic, and dill. Cook, stirring for
about a minute, then scrape the crumbs into a
bowl and return the pan to the heat.

Melt the last Tbsp of butter, stir in the
flour, and whisk in the milk. Simmer 5 minutes
and add to the chard mixture. Add the cheese,
correct for salt, and season with pepper.

Pour into the prepared dish and cover with
the bread crumbs. Bake until heated through and
golden on the surface, about 25 minutes. Let settle
a few minutes before serving.

Visit the recipe archive on our website at
To add your own contributions, send an e-mail to
webmaster@communityfarms.org.

Cookbook for Sale

Now available, for $20: From Asparagus to
Zucchini: a Guide to Farm Fresh Seasonal Produce

This perennial favorite at CSAs across the
country is arranged alphabetically by vegetable,
with preparation tips and recipes, as well as seasonal recipes, home preservation, and a “kids
and vegetables” section. It’s produced by a CSA
coalition in Madison, Wisconsin. If you pick up
your share at the farm you can look through the
copy at the check-in table. If you are a Cam-
bridge box share member and want to take a
look before you purchase, send an email to
Marla at walthamfields@communityfarms.org
and I’ll arrange to have our copy at your site. If
you like it, let me know and we’ll include a new
copy to your site the following week! Make
checks out to CFO for $20. Proceeds from the
book sale go partly to our charitable work and
partly to the Madison Area CSA Coalition,
which also does educational outreach and spon-
sors a program to make fresh food accessible to
lower-income households.

Volunteer Drop-in Times

Sundays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and
Thursdays

8:30 a.m. or 1:00 p.m.

There’s no need to call ahead, just come at
the drop-in times and meet at the
distribution shelter or look for farm staff in
the fields.

(No volunteers Mondays, Fridays, or
Saturdays)

To reach us:

Amanda Cather: farmmanager@communityfarms.org
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Newsletter Submissions: newsletter@communityfarms.org
CFO Board of Directors: board@communityfarms.org

Community Farms Outreach is a nonprofit organization dedicated to
farmland preservation, hunger relief, and education.