Notes from the Field

The past two weeks in the fields have been busy ones for us. The week’s hiatus in our harvest, however undesirable, allowed us some time to get caught up on the weeding that had gotten away from us early in the month, both at the Field Station and the Lyman Estate. We found ourselves hand-weeding peppers, fennel and chard, planted early and covered with reemay to “hide” them from the woodchucks and cool temperatures, that had become choked with grass before our eyes. We weeded carrots and beets, which despite being previously tractor-cultivated and hoed, were buried in a flush of lamb’s quarters and galinsoga that was like nothing I’ve ever seen before—the result of a “perfect storm” of rain followed by 90-degree heat two weeks ago. We cultivated and hoed our tomatoes and pumpkins, and planted crops that had been waiting in the hoophouse for weeks—second plantings of melons and squash, basil and fennel, and July broccoli (which was instantly eaten by rabbits, to our fury). We even seeded our fall kale, cauliflower and collards—planting the seeds of September in mid-June. And we felt pretty good at the end of the week.

Before we could take a breath, however, the weeds were back. This week, we will need to turn under several beds of beets and carrots that are simply too weedy for us to manage, along with several beds of lettuce, spinach and broccoli that have been completely decimated by rabbits and woodchucks. The intense pressure on our greens and brassicas from these hungry critters is making us realize that our options for rotation in several fields are severely limited, and forcing us to re-think our crop plan in midseason. The dry weather has also arrived, turning our exposed and sandy fields into mini-deserts, complete with sandstorms, and creating stressed out-crops and time-consuming irrigation demands. Potato beetles that hatched despite our vigilant egg-crushing in early June are consuming our fingerlings at an alarming rate. We have news from the University of Massachusetts Extension service that downy mildew, a potentially serious disease of pumpkins and other cucurbits, is moving north into New England again this year. And our harvests are still frustratingly small, with the fortunate exception of the few crops that we planted “extra” of for our hunger relief partners, who continue to receive regular, sizable deliveries of lettuce.

Our little farm is an incredibly hopeful place. It’s been around for 10 years now, growing food in an unlikely place despite weed pressure, pest pressure, uncertain land tenure and its unlikely and incredibly hopeful beginnings. Those of you who have been with the farm far longer than I have know that this is a place where struggle has been a bit of a constant, but where hope has always overcome it. Farms, except where economic pressure puts them out of business, usually are.

“Will the shares get bigger?” shareholders keep asking. All I can say is, I hope so. I believe so. We are turning the corner from the ‘salad days’ of June into the squash-beet-carrot-bean days of July, and on into the tomato-potato-pepper-melon days of August. And I have hope.

Amanda and the farm crew

A message from Our Fruit Share Partner:

Autumn Hills is delighted to work with Waltham Fields Community Farm for the fourth consecutive year, supplying members with weekly deliveries of fresh-picked fruit starting around the last week of August and continuing through the CSA season.

Our growing methods can be described as "extreme IPM," as we strive to intervene as little as possible. IPM stands for Integrated Pest

continued on the other side
Fruit Share Message, continued

Management which, while not completely organic, means we take care to farm in a most sustainable and responsible way. (Note: Organic tree fruit production is virtually impossible in the Northeast. If we could be organic-we would.) We do not use herbicides, a very harsh systemic, as is the practice of most orchards. We do use mushroom based (organic) fungicide.

Autumn Hills fruit has won the top prize and highest number of ribbons at Topsfield Fair (America’s oldest country fair) three years in a row. Here’s a list of fruit we’ve delivered in past seasons to CSA members: peaches, bosc pears, and Italian plums, plus apple varieties: paula red, ginger gold, gala, macintosh, cortland, empire, spencer, macoun, rhode island greening, fuji, braeburn, cox orange pippin, red delicious, golden delicious, mutsu, and sun crisp.

Autumn Hills is located in Groton, about 45 miles northwest of Boston just outside of route 495. The landscape is glacial drumlin with panoramic views of the New Hampshire hills and mountains to the north and west. We are responsible land stewards and have participated in a research project tracking agricultural impact on migratory nesting birds. This study has been going on for about 5 years, and we are happy to report no ill effects on our bird populations.

Autumn Hills is also open for "pick your own" in September and October, weekdays by appointment and weekends from 10AM to 5PM. We’ll certainly give you the VIP treatment if you visit us during our harvest season and identify yourself as one of our CSA customers

Lynn and Ann Harris
www.AutumnHillsOrchard.com

Fruit shares are available to WFCF CSA shareholders for $60 for the season. Payment for fruit shares is due July 15. Sign up for a fruit share at the Sunday or Thursday CSA distribution. Please make checks payable to Community Farms Outreach.

Community Supported Agriculture in Bloom

Posted by shareholder Parke Wilde on usfoodpolicy.blogspot.com on 6/19/05.

The thoughtful farmers at the Waltham Fields Community Farm only bristled slightly when I asked whether they plant a more diverse set of crops than a commercial farm would. They are a commercial farm. They know, to the nearest thousand dollars, the per acre value of their produce, based on a sophisticated computation from local retail and wholesale prices. They are proud to promise their Community Supported Agriculture share holders, including my family, a reasonably good deal based on dollars and sense rather than mere pounds of gross weight. Still, they know that their own sustainable agriculture principles are part of the essence of their product. They follow organic practices, but are not certified by USDA as organic, and might or might not seek such certification even if they didn’t face technical hurdles, such as a challenge in maintaining the proper chemical-free buffer zone from neighboring properties in the surrounding suburban landscape. They feel the certification is less necessary when customers can meet the farmers themselves and ask any questions they like. At today’s third-Sunday-of-the-month outdoor question and answer session, the farmers did have to acknowledge that the joy of knowing where one’s food comes from, and how, and even helping to grow it, is a significant share-holder motivation. Indeed, sitting at a picnic table laden with organic treats, in conversation with this sweaty fingernailed bunch of entrepreneur/idealists, with kids rolling around in the grass nearby, as the shadows lengthened in the peak of summer’s sun, one has to ask: who could put a price on this?

Why are you a member of WFCF CSA? Send your thoughts to newsletter@communityfarms.org.

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