



Big Leaf Farm Newsletter Week #14

**August 30– September 5
Farm News**

This week we sowed our last vegetable starts in the greenhouse: over-wintering sweet onions for harvest next summer. After a long spring and summer of shepherding starts out of the greenhouse and into the ground, it's a little bit of a relief to know that these are the last ones, but also a little sad. Sowing onion seeds are a sign that fall is really here, and doing so makes us turn our attention to other tasks we need to complete before the winter rains begin in earnest. We'll still sow a few seeds directly in the ground – over-wintering spinach and some Asian greens, but from here on out the bulk of our time will be spent harvesting what is already in the ground and preparing for next year.

Our biggest task this fall is preparing ground for next spring. Because of our symphytan problems we will need a new growing field. This means converting well over an acre of our old hay field into a plot for growing vegetables. In preparation for next spring we'll have to break up the sod, spread mineral amendments, and plant a cover crop that will grow throughout the winter. We're a little bit overwhelmed at the prospect because the scope of this endeavor exceeds anything we've done before. But we're also excited as we picture our new field near the large oak tree where the driveway turns onto the farm.

We use a variety of certified organic mineral amendments here at the farm. These are minerals that have been mined out of the ground, often far away. Doing this might sound anathema to growing produce for local consumption. After all, if we are trying to reduce our 'food miles' shouldn't we also reduce the miles of everything that goes into growing that food?

This is an issue we are still coming to terms with. However, for now we feel we can justify using these materials and the considerable expense of purchasing them on the grounds that well balanced soils make well balanced and healthy plants and humans. Soils in the Pacific Northwest might seem rich, but in reality, they are badly leached by all the rain we receive every winter. Over 40 inches of rain falling each year wash out many of the essential chemicals that plants need in their growth. These same chemicals are the ones required by healthy human bodies. So we strive to replace these chemicals in a balanced fashion by spreading ground limestone, crushed phosphorous-rich rock, and potash in order to boost the calcium, phosphorous and potassium levels in the plants

we grow. We believe doing so, in an age when many of our foods are declining in nutrient content, results in foods that are far superior to the produce you find in the grocery store. A recent study out of the UK concluded that organically grown produce is not necessarily more nutritious than produce grown conventionally. This isn't a surprise to us, because organic practices don't necessarily address soil chemistry issues. We believe paying good attention to soil chemistry is the first step in growing good healthy food. So we'll be out there this fall, spreading amendments on our new field, working them into the soil, and allowing the earthworms and cover crops incorporate them into the soil in preparation for next year.

Cast of characters

- **Summer squash**

- **Lettuce:** This week we have more of Waldmann's Dark green from the same sowing as last week. After this we are back to some more colorful selections for a while, then on to salad mix for the fall. Beds for mesclun mix are germinating now...

- **Carrots**

- **Green beans:** Slow to come on, these are now here in force. Some of the large ones may need to have the string pulled as you are trimming them. These are really tasty lightly cooked in boiling water and dressed with a little butter and fresh herbs.

- **Melons (rotation):** Melons made a last-minute addition to the line up last week. As I was picking tomatoes last Thursday I was overwhelmed by the flavor of ripe musk melon in the greenhouse. I was pleasantly surprised to see there were enough of them and watermelons to give out to folks at the Holgate pick up. Oregon City folks and those at the hospital get their share this week. Melons are an iffy proposition here in the Willamette valley – we really don't get enough heat here in the summer. That's why the melons you see here in the stores come from California, and later from east of the Cascades. That makes these melons that much more special!

- **Tomatoes:** Tomatoes are really winding down, with all the cool cloudy weather. We're hoping to get a shot of warmth before fall sets in for good to ripen up some of those green ones hanging on the vines. You may get a tomato or two this week that could benefit from a little ripening. Leave it on your counter out of direct sun for a few days and it will ripen up nicely.

- **Eggplant:** We're back to Asian eggplant this week. Here at the farm we prefer the flavor of these over the larger globe eggplant.

- **Red Bell Pepper**

- **Italian Sweet Pepper**

- **Jalapeños:** These spicy peppers are turning red. Are they hotter? You decide.

- **Poblanos:** Best cooked into beans or roasted.

- **Storage onions:** These are the first of our storage onions. They are much more pungent than the sweet onions you received during the summer.

Recipes

Polenta Pie

More of a concept than a recipe this doesn't have a set ingredient list. It can accept any number of vegetables. The liquid in tomatoes (fresh or canned) help the flavors to meld.

- 2 ½ cups of water (for creamier polenta, substitute ½ cup of water with milk.
- 1 cup coarse cornmeal or corn grits
- ½ tsp salt.
- 1 large onion
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1-2 summer squash, chopped.
- 5-6 Asian eggplant, cut into rounds
- 1-2 large tomatoes chopped or diced (or one 15 oz can)
- A handful of green beans, trimmed.
- Cheese (mozzarella, parmesan, or cheddar work well)

Heat the water just to a boil and add the polenta in a steady stream, stirring, to prevent clumping and the salt. Then turn the heat down and simmer, stirring constantly until thick, for 5-15 minutes (depending upon the coarseness of the grind of the corn meal). If the mixture becomes too thick, stir in a little more water, but you want the resulting polenta to be as thick as possible. Because I tend to burn polenta by leaving it unattended for even a minute I cook it over a double-boiler. Either way works fine. Once done, remove the polenta to a lightly greased casserole dish (9x13 inch), and spread it out, making a thin crust that covers both the sides and bottom of the dish. If you want to use a different size of dish alter the amount of polenta proportionally.

Sautee the onion and garlic until the onion is translucent, and add the eggplant and cook until it has softened somewhat. Then add the squash, tomatoes and green beans and cook until the squash is just tender but not soft, same for the green beans. Sometimes I'll cover the pan to steam the squash and beans, but if there is a lot of liquid you want to cook some of it off so the resulting casserole isn't too watery. Once done, add the cooked vegetables to the polenta lined pan, cover with a sprinkling of cheese, and bake in a 400 degree oven until bubbly and brown on top.

Squash frittata

Frittatas aren't just for breakfast; this one makes fine dinner fare. The flavor of farm eggs makes this recipe really shine.

- 1 ¼ pounds zucchini, coarsely grated
- salt and pepper (freshly milled is best)
- 3 T olive oil
- 6 eggs, beaten
- 1 large garlic clove, minced.

- 1 T fresh chopped marjoram, oregano, basil or parsley. If using basil or parsley, you can up the amount considerably.
- 1/3 cup freshly grated Parmesan or dry Jack cheese.

Toss the grated zucchini with 1 t of salt and set in a colander for 20 to 30 minutes, then rinse briefly rinse the squash and squeeze it dry. Warm the oil in a skillet and add the zucchini and cook until it's dry and flecked with gold in a few places. This should take about 6-7 minutes. Transfer to a bowl and wipe out the pan. Preheat the broiler, then beat the eggs with a few pinches of salt and some pepper and stir in the garlic, zucchini, herbs and cheese. Add the remaining oil and the eggs. Lower the heat and cook for a minute or so, then cover over low-medium heat until the eggs are set and the top is almost dry, about 10 minutes. If you don't use low heat it is easy to burn the eggs. Finally, put the frittata 4-6 inches under the broiler and monitor closely until the top is golden brown.

A nice variation calls for the addition of ½ to 1 cup of Ricotta cheese or cottage cheese to the egg mixture before baking. *'Vegetarian Cooking for Everyone' by Deborah Madison*

Green Beans with sesame paste and garlic

Here's a nice dish that highlights green beans, Indian style, courtesy of the master of Indian cuisine, Madhur Jaffrey in her book 'World of the East Vegetarian Cooking'

- 1 ¼ lb green beans, stringed, if necessary
- 1 ½ t plus ½ t salt.
- 3 T oil
- 1 tsp black mustard seed
- 4-5 medium garlic cloves, peeled and minced
- 1/2 inch cube of fresh ginger, peeled and finely grated
- 1 ½ T roasted sesame seeds, ground.
- 2 T chopped parsley
- pinch of black pepper
- pinch of cayenne pepper
- 1 ½ t lemon juice

Dry roast the sesame seeds in a hot skillet, then grind them in a mortar and pestle, or a small spice grinder or food processor. Trim the beans and cut into 1" pieces. Boil 2 quarts of water salted with 1 ½ t of salt. Once the water is boiling, add the beans and cook for 4-5 minutes, until they are tender but still crisp. Do not overcook! Empty the beans into a colander and rinse with cold tap water to cool. This will prevent them from overcooking and fix the green color.

Heat the oil in a heavy skillet (preferably cast-iron). When the oil is very hot add the mustard seeds. Once they start to pop (less than a minute), add the garlic and stir, then add the ginger and stir once. Then put in the green beans and the ground roasted sesame seeds, cilantro, black and cayenne pepper, lemon juice and remainder of salt. Lower the heat and stir, mixing well and then tasting for seasoning. When the beans are heated through, turn off the heat, serve, and enjoy.