

Report from the Field

Watermelons were planted around June 1st and again in early July. A familiar story by now, the first planting did not do well because of the heavy rains. The late planting was a bit of an experiment, one that we tried in order to mitigate the sad state of the early planting. The second planting will not be ready, if ever, until September. We will get some fruit off the first planting soon, and we are currently waiting to harvest until we see one of the tell-tale ready-for-harvest signs: the vine directly attached to the melon turning brown.



Last Sunday (8/4) we planted spinach; we were hopeful it would germinate with the cool nights. It looks like we were successful; here is a photo of the seedlings. More will be planted this week.



Peppers have started to come in, and, weather permitting, we will have them for the next 8-10 weeks. We normally only pick red peppers; a green pepper is not fully ripe.



Another project we are working on is establishing a pasture for our future cow(s). These photos are from an area where we planted oats, fescue, and clover this spring. The oats were cut before they got too stalky, and now the clover, 4 different kinds, is taking over. Soon we will plant timothy grass and Kentucky bluegrass to have a more well-rounded, diverse collection of plants for grazing. Nature thrives with diversity.



In addition to the obvious benefit of milk for our family we are pursuing a cow for the health of our land and our planet. Over the past 5 years, we have increased the organic matter of our soils substantially by using composted dairy manure (organic matter is key to nutrient and water holding in the soil; it is a life sustaining, essential carbonaceous material that allows soil, and subsequently plants, to thrive). Using composted cow manure, despite its benefits, is not the ideal because it is supporting a system that is not encouraging the carbon sequestration that is possible with ruminants (i.e. cows, deer, bison). In this system, cows are kept indoors year-round, their manure mixed with some type of wood shavings, hay or straw.



It is piled up, and then turned routinely to convert it into compost. Cows on such farms are normally fed corn silage; corn is mostly planted using tillage agriculture methods. The result of tillage agriculture, results in an incredible amount of soil loss, up to 10,000 lbs. per acre in the Midwest, whereas a grazing system results in minimal soil loss and greater water retention.



Having ruminants directly on the land can have great benefits; it can also be detrimental. It depends on how the cows are managed. If they are kept in one place they can degrade the land and pollute water. If they are moved routinely they can build organic matter by their grazing action. This can have substantial benefits to the soil, and also to our current CO₂ “problem”. Agriculture has been a large part of the problem with respect to CO₂; tilling land and leaving soil bare results in carbon in the soil being oxidized, converting it to CO₂.

We will work on a rotational grazing system trying to put carbon back into the soil. We are also planning to rotate areas in and out of vegetable production, having the cow(s) there in the fallow periods.