

Report from the Field

The longer you live in a place the more you get to pay attention to the sequence of season: a large maple a little ways from our house buds out first, then the one out our front door. The black walnuts will take their time, yet still budding and leafing out before the catalpa tree, which will wake from its winter rest very late. The catalpa will not be ready to offer morning shade over our vegetable washing area until June.

In spite of this awareness, we still forget to pick from our asparagus patch each spring, simply because it is in a far flung corner of one of our fields. But we certainly haven't forgotten all the veggies we have meticulously planned for the CSA. We are busy bees this time of year, doing many tasks that are starting to feel as a yearly routine, but there are always changes, and challenges, and this season is the same in that regard. Most things are doing well, and some experiments are doing better than hoped, while new challenges have arisen.

One of the experiments is to grow some of our sugar snap peas in the greenhouse. The plants are over 6 feet already and covered in flowers. For comparison, the peas we planted outside are a mere foot tall. The greenhouse peas will take about 10 days to fully form post flowering, so we'll have some peas the 2nd week of the CSA.



Another experiment is growing cucumbers in the greenhouse on a trellis. We'll have cucumbers earlier, and the trellis will allow us to save some back strain. The plants are still small; the cucumber plants are just starting



to climb the trellis. A challenge with this method is that the trellis means we can't cover them with row covers as long for bug protection. The cucumber beetle is a major pest, not for the damage it does, but more the bacterial disease it carries and transmits to the plant. We are committed to not using pesticides; we don't feel comfortable with the anything that is intended to kill, but we do need to be constantly looking for solutions to pest challenges. One of those possible solutions is a type of clay, kaolin. This is not a pesticide, but rather a deterrent. It is sprayed on crops and when pests land on the plant they don't like it, kind of like us



trying to walk through mud, so they go somewhere else. The cucumber beetles were already on the plants, so we have tried a single application of the clay. (photos: left - trellised cukes, right - cucumber beetle hiding in new growth on cucumber plant)

The major challenge this spring is flea beetles. There are two primary types of concern for us, a species that attack brassicas (brassicas include broccoli, cabbage, kale, mustard, mizuna, arugula), and those that attack the solanaceous family (tomatoes, eggplants, peppers, potatoes). From past experience, growing mustard, mizuna, and arugula mid-spring becomes an exercise in futility, so we are forgoing these crops for a few more weeks. The new challenge is with kale (and collards), our beloved kale. We eat kale 4-5 days a week for many months of the year. The flea beetles are attacking



relentlessly. Luckily they are not affecting all varieties equally, so with a little luck, we'll still have one variety of kale soon. We are also trying a number of experiments to deal with the problem: planting onions around the plants to discourage the pests, spraying kaolin clay, and mulching. In addition, we have another planting with a tight row cover to try to prevent the buggers from getting to them.

2-4-D

The tomatoes are growing well in the greenhouse, where they were transplanted in early May. Tomatoes are very important to the farm's financial survival, so we pay a lot of attention to their health. That includes making sure they are warm at night (we moved them to our basement on cool nights for weeks in April), rotating where they go each season to avoid disease and insect pressure, and avoiding moisture on their leaves to minimize fungal disease pressure. So when we saw a plant last week that had a great deal of ailing leaves we were concerned. It did not look like any of the fungal diseases we knew of so we decided to have it tested. Luckily, the lab believed it was a mineral deficiency, an anomaly specific to that plant alone (since the rest are fine), and not a plant-communicable disease. The interesting part for us was a side discussion at the lab about ground water contamination. Someone else had brought a tomato plant to the lab with some stunted growth. The suspected cause of the retarded growth was contamination from irrigation water, the water being from a shallow well on the farm. The contaminant was 2-4-D, an herbicide (and you thought 2-4-D was related to R2D2 and C3PO) the farmer had used in past years, but not recently. This pesticide not only persisted in the ground water, but remained in concentrations high enough to cause damage to irrigated plants. This chemical is likely the next herbicide to be used extensively in genetically modified crops. The nice cornfields we drive by (in Iowa and Storrs, CT) are planted with genetically modified corn, which is designed to withstand the herbicide Roundup. But Roundup is becoming less effective as weeds build resistance to it (Mother Nature always has a way to get around our smart inventions) so the next herbicide to be used is 2-4-D. Its persistence in groundwater and its effect on plants (and how about us people, and animals, drinking the water?) should make us ask stop and think.

Happy Cow-Talk

Opal and calf continue to do well. We are learning to milk, and we are climbing the learning curve. Opal is not big on letting down her milk for us. Not a strict dairy breed, she apparently has more control of her let-down. So we spent much of the last few weeks trying to catch her nursing her calf and then we would get two teats to milk, while the calf would get her two. This required the children to spend many hours a day watching for the calf to nurse, yelling, and then us frantically running over to milk.



This was obviously time consuming, and unsustainable. So two nights ago we separated the calf from Opal for night. Opal bellowed for the entire night. Oh, I should mention that they are currently about 50 feet from the house. From a milking perspective, this worked well: Opal was full of milk in the morning and more willing to let us have some. But it wasn't so good for trying to sleep. A friend casually mentioned Opal would only do this for a week. Only a week! That is like having a teething infant again. Amazingly, we separated last night and Opal didn't say boo all night. Fingers crossed for tonight!

(calf trying out her stall and Opal not so sure about the stanchion)