

Report from the Field

In general, this has been a great growing year. After a very dry early and mid-spring, the deluge of June set back some of the crops. We then returned to very dry weather in July and August. As long as a farmer has a good water source, which we do from our well, dry weather is helpful in avoiding many fungal diseases on crops. However, dry weather also means more work in the form of irrigation, and furthermore, lack of rain means less pasture growth for the cows.

Eggplant

One of the success stories we had this year is the eggplant. Over the past few years our eggplant harvests have steadily declined due to flea beetle damage. The first photo is from last year, when the flea beetles were just starting to shred the eggplant leaves. A few weeks after this photo was taken the leaves were like lace.



This year we decided to plant eggplant at our new field (2nd photo) in Willington, and this has been an (almost) total success. The plants look great; we had no flea beetle damage, and only minimal amounts of hand-squishing of Colorado Potato Beetle was required. The only struggle this year was with the rodents. They decided to make homes inside the eggplants, their personal favorite being the Asian variety Orient Charm. In spite of this however, this year is still our best since 2011 for eggplant. As the eggplant demonstrated, we expect that rotating crops between our Storrs and Willington fields will continue to be very helpful in controlling pest pressure in the future.



Peppers

Our saddest crop story this year has been the peppers. By this point in the season we are normally awash in red peppers. But this year a small worm is having a field day with them. As soon as the peppers begin to turn a little bit red adult flies lay their eggs inside. Long before the pepper has time to turn completely red the larvae tunnel through the flesh of the pepper spoiling and making it unsellable. If we harvest the peppers green they are undamaged, but we like to sell mostly ripe, red peppers. This winter we'll be researching how best to avoid/limit the damage next year.



Large Fruit

One of our most exciting additions this year is large fruit. Although still very limited, we are starting to be able to sell/distribute apples and Asian pears.

Asian pears have become a favorite in our house. When picked ripe (which grocery store pears rarely are), they are juicy, sweet, and delicious. We are still learning the best time to harvest, so be sure to let us know what you think of the flavor. The right harvest time can make the difference between a so-so and a great taste. Just like apples and other fruits, there are countless varieties of Asian pears with distinct flavors and textures. We won't have too many this year (the trees are just starting to produce, but they should increase

each



year), but we hope to give those who want to an opportunity to try them.

Asian pears have fewer pest and disease issues than any other local, commercially grown, fruit. They are a good alternative to apples, which are susceptible to many pests and diseases, and can be stored for long periods, just like apples. The reduced pest/disease pressure is an immense benefit for the farmer and the environment. Please let us know how you like them; if there is demand, we will plant many more trees.

We will also have apples for the CSA this year. Remember we don't spray pesticides, and all apples purchased in the store are sprayed, whether they're labeled organic, conventional, ecological, etc. Unless it says "no-spray", they are sprayed with some kind of pesticide. One common spray is for sooty blotch, a fungus that is on the skin of the apple. The fungus is harmless to humans, and only causes cosmetic damage to the apple. Not spraying for it is beneficial, among other reasons because the phytochemicals the apple is producing to fight the fungus are likely beneficial for us to consume. But the apples from Shundahai will not look as beautiful as the apples from the store.

We have found that it is easy to grow perfect looking vegetables without spraying, but fruit is much harder. When we considered growing fruit a few years ago we were told that you cannot do it without spray. We chose to go ahead anyway, knowing that the fruits we'll grow may not have the supermarket look we're all been used to, but will likely have higher nutritional value and environmental integrity.

Potatoes

This year, we planted potatoes at our new field in Willington. With respect to pests such as Colorado Potato Beetle, which eat the leaves, and rodents, which eat the tubers, we had very few problems. But a known risk of planting potatoes in a field that was sod the previous year is wire worm damage (pictures below). We planted in this field knowing the risks, in order to cluster together the two crops that Colorado Potato Beetles like: potatoes and eggplant. Unfortunately, almost all the potatoes we harvested so far have wireworm damage. The damage doesn't go very deep, but it does require peeling or paring off affected parts of the potato. Our commitment to pesticide free food has risks (Colorado Potato Beetle and flea beetles can be

easily sprayed for); please bear with the damage, otherwise we will have to consume a few thousand pounds of potatoes ourselves this winter.



We'll end this newsletter on a happy note, with a picture of a welcome visitor we didn't until recently know we had: a praying mantis. We discovered its cocoon in the raspberry bushes (a biologist pointed it out). We are always happy to have praying mantises on our farm, because they are voracious pest eaters, and that is why farmers refer to them as beneficial insects. When spraying is not an option, you learn to rely on beneficial insects a lot, and do what you can to encourage them on the farm, in hope that they will in turn help out by controlling pest populations. We hope our friends the praying mantises are happy in their cocoon and we especially hope that they come out hungry when they are ready to emerge.

