

## **The use of pesticides in CSAs, organic foods and local foods: how to know what you're eating.**

Part of the mission of our farm is to educate people about food related issues. Years of farming experience has taught us a lot about food production methods, such as conventional, organic, no spray, etc., and their impact on our health and the environment. We want to share some of what we've learned with you.

At this time of the year, people are thinking about joining a CSA, looking forward to the beginning of the farmers' markets and the days when grocery store aisles will once again be stocked with local produce. Thus, this is a good time to talk about some things that you may want to know before joining a CSA, shopping at the market, etc. These may come as a surprise, but hold on and keep reading.

- 1. Organic does not mean unsprayed. Pesticides are routinely sprayed on organic fruits and vegetables.**
- 2. CSA does not equal unsprayed food or organic food. Many CSAs use conventional pesticides and conventional farming practices; many use organic pesticides; a few do not spray any pesticides at all.**
- 3. Local does not mean unsprayed, and it does not mean organic.**

The points above, especially the first two come as a surprise to many food conscious people. We tend to assume that CSA implies organic, which we believe implies no pesticides. This is simply not true. Most CSAs spray pesticides and fungicides, some conventional, some organic. The ones who don't spray anything, like us, are a minority, and there's no official label for them. Unless a CSA specifically mentions in their information materials that they do not spray any kinds of pesticides or fungicides, it is prudent to assume that they do (ask!).

So what are organic pesticides? Most people consider that an oxymoron. Well, organic certification allows farmers to spray certain pesticides and fungicides. Approved organic pesticides and fungicides serve the same purpose as conventional ones: to kill insects, weeds and fungi. Many people assume that because they are organic and derived from natural sources, these pesticides and fungicides are not harmful to humans or the environment. Unfortunately, this is not true. If you'd like to learn more on the topic of organic pesticides, here is an [article from Scientific American](#) and another article [from NPR](#). [This link from UConn](#) lists some organic pesticides on pg.23, and organic fungicides on pg.30, with an interesting comment from Cornell University on pg.39.

### **So what is one to do?**

CSAs that spray their crops do not usually advertise the fact, because it is not in their interest. Many people join a CSA in part because they want "clean", healthy food, without pesticides. Well, now you know that just because your food comes from a CSA it does not mean that it was not sprayed. So what can you do? The best thing is to speak directly to farmers and ask specific questions before joining their CSA. Engage the farmer who grows your food, ask about their practices, whether they use pesticides, fungicides, herbicides, or anything else you want to know about. Let them know what is important to you, and what you are concerned about. Most farmers will openly engage with you. This is the only way to really know what goes in your food. So don't assume anything; talk to the farmer. After all, this is one of the great benefits of eating local.

And now for something a little lighter:

## Report from the Field

The changes this winter have been so dramatic: a very warm winter, then a few feet of snow with temperatures down to -10F, then warm again. We are grateful to be receiving moisture in some form after the exceptionally dry year we had in 2015, although we would be happy to do without the shoveling, especially the heavy snow we had.

Whenever it snows, we must shovel clear the top and sides of our greenhouses, so that snow doesn't build up and collapse them. Our daughters, aged 10 and 12, are old enough now to be very helpful with this tough job. In the past, Ed and Raluca had the two greenhouses all to themselves, and it happened for two years in a row that we got the most snowfall when Ed was sick with the stomach bug, but he had to get out there anyway. This year, with no stomach bug, and with our girls' help, clearing the greenhouses felt much easier. Most kids look forward to snow days, but our children are a little reserved that way; they know the work that is involved for us and them, so their excitement is somewhat tempered, especially after a big storm. They do eventually get to play in the snow and go sledding, after the shoveling is all done.



Unlike past years, this year we decided to not have the greenhouses full of greens through the winter. Instead we planned to start fresh plantings in mid-to-late winter.

We had this scruffy old man (Ed) starting spinach, lettuces, claytonia, and Asian salad greens in trays in late January. He works hard, but you can tell his vision is going by how far he is holding the seed packet away from him to be able to read it.



Most of those seedlings are now doing well. They will be transplanted in the ground in the next few weeks and we can look forward to spinach and salad come April. Pictured below are lettuces, claytonia, hardy Asian greens, and spinach.



At the end of January, Raluca prepared a bed and seeded carrots. Not surprisingly, it takes at least 3 weeks for the carrots to germinate at this time of year. With plenty of sunshine, we'll be harvesting carrots off this bed in May.



### **The Orchard**

Last year we started to truly enjoy, and share with the CSA, the uhm, fruits of our labor in the orchard. As we write this, we are just finishing our winter stores of apples and Asian pears, and now looking forward to the 2016 harvest. We are still learning a great deal about how to manage an orchard, including when the fruit is at its best for picking. This definitely applies to Asian pears, which are heaven sent when picked fully ripe. We are keeping our fingers crossed that with the crazy fluctuating winter temperatures we've

seen, the trees haven't sustained significant bud damage, which would reduce this year's fruit harvest (some of the buds started to open in January, and were damaged by the subsequent frigid temperatures).

Over the past few weeks we have had help with the trees from an enthusiastic young orchardist who is far more knowledgeable than us in orchard pruning. Based on his input, we are not expecting a large increase in fruit offerings this year (except strawberries, we expect a lot more of them), but the long term prospects for the orchard do look very good!

### Cow Happenings

With the extreme cold and wind over the weekend the cows showed their true nature: as the wind howled and we cowered, they just stood out in the open, placidly looking at us, as if confused by our silly need to cover and take shelter. They have barns they can go in, but the cold is mostly of no concern to them. We have learned that a cow's distain is for heat, with cooler weather being a welcomed relief from the torment of flies. What the cows miss in the winter, however, is green grass, which makes spring their happiest time – they can munch all day and be free of pests.



Raluca continues to milk the cows, and we are slowly increasing the number of wheels in our cheese "cave". The family's favorite so far has been the one parmesan we aged for 6 months, but it is so hard to wait that long! Most wheels do not make it past three months before we cut into them...



Lastly, we'll share some cow excitement occurred late last year:

After hearing some cries for help I ran to the movable cow barn to find Raluca sitting, appearing comfortable in a pile of hay, looking confused and with blood running down her nose.

Each morning Raluca cuts up about 30 lbs. of vegetables – breakfast treats to keep the cows busy and happy while she milks them. She brings this food plus her milking supplies to wherever the cows may be that day: on pasture, or at the paddocks for the winter. Raluca brings one cow at a time into the milking parlor, puts her in a stanchion, and gives her breakfast. She then attaches a strap to the hind leg of the cow to ensure that she doesn't get kicked while crouched down by the udder, milking. The leg strap worked well for a long time, but eventually started to get weaker. The cows very rarely kick, and when they do it is usually just a twitch because a fly is bothering them.

On this particular morning Raluca was trimming the hairs of one cow's udder, in order to get better access to the teats. Unfortunately the scissors touched the cow's udder and the cold metal made her flinch. She instinctively kicked to get whatever was causing the discomfort away, and the kick landed right between Raluca's eyes.

Raluca, stunned, was unsure of how badly she was hurt. Luckily she was not seriously hurt, other than having a couple black eyes and a sore nose for a few weeks. She has not trimmed any hairs off the cows' udders since then. And a new, much improved leg strap was installed to prevent the cows from kicking again. Lesson learned.

Ed, not to be outdone, had to do something foolish. Our cows are generally big teddy bears. We hug them, scratch them, and get kisses from them... Sometimes we sort of lay or lean on them when we give them a hug. One day, when Ed was cuddling with big Mama Opal in the pasture, he decided it would be a good idea to throw a leg over her, just to see what it would feel like to sort of ride her. He sat up and at first Opal just continued to chew her cud, not disturbed. Then she slowly looked over at Ed sitting proudly on her back and ... bolted. She ran out from under him as fast as she could. Ed, went flying backwards arse over teakettle, arms and legs splayed wide, crashing to the ground with a thud. Mama Opal did not like the riding idea. (Ed was not hurt badly after this incident, and he doesn't expect any sympathy).