



Farm Notes

CSA Newsletter

Vol. 24 No. 4

July 9 - 13, 2023



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Celebrating Fifty Years of Farming in Wheatland

by Hana Newcomb

Yesterday, on an intensely humid Sunday afternoon, we picked blueberries in the magical patch while toddlers and babies played in the wading pool set up under the trees and we shared a potluck picnic and piles of barbecued chicken, reveling in the sprawling multi-generational group that we have become. With almost no notice at all – because we have been doing this for so long – a group of about 40 farmers and family members gathered to continue the tradition of the Blueberry Pickernic (it was the Blue-B-Q when Timothy was the host for so many years, and he deserves the credit for starting this tradition over 40 years ago).

After we finished eating, while the naked babies splashed in the pool nearby, four founding farmers sat under the trees and told us our origin story – the story of how these beautiful 400 acres came into our lives. These farmers are in their 80's now, and they were part of the group that joined together to purchase this land in 1973. Charles and Sue Moutoux (of Moutoux Orchard) and Chip and Susan Planck (of Wheatland Vegetable Farms) told us about the friendships and the vision that brought us to this day. (My mother, Hiu Newcomb,

another of the founding farmers, was away on vacation and missed this party.)

It's a long story and there was a lot of luck and timing involved, as well as risk and hard work. In 1948, Charles Moutoux's parents bought a big piece of property in Vienna, wanting to establish an orchard as a retirement project. Tony Newcomb's parents bought a corner of that property so they could have a house in the country. Those families remained neighbors and friends for the rest of their lives. That was the land that became the original Moutoux Orchard and the first fields of Potomac Vegetable Farms.

My father, Tony Newcomb, was an instigator from his earliest years, and he and Charles Moutoux were boyhood friends, starting in the first grade. Charles says, "Tony was always the leader. I was happy to follow him... even when we did stupid and dangerous things."

In the early 1970s, Tony began the search for a farm in Loudoun County and when he found these 400 acres, he invited various friends with varying visions to join him in the purchase. It was a leap of faith for four young families. They borrowed money from parents, they used their tiny savings, they worked off-farm jobs

continued on page 2



photo courtesy of hana newcomb

From left: Sue Moutoux, Charles Moutoux, Chip Planck, and Susan Planck, four of the founding farmers.

continued from page 1

to pay the mortgage. As Chip Planck reminds us all, the price of land always looks smaller when we look back, but at the time it was a heavy lift. This is always true, forevermore.

It was a gamble that paid off. 50 years later, there are 8 independent enterprises on these 400 acres, growing vegetables, milking cows, raising chickens, raising children, sharing borders, sharing equipment, sharing wisdom, buying and selling from each other, and taking care of this precious agricultural



photos courtesy of hana newcomb

Second cousins in the kiddie pool.

space together. The Newcomb family never really moved from Vienna as a whole, but there are three generations of Newcombs living in Wheatland, three generations of Moutoux are there and have expanded their holdings, the Plancks are retired and living there, and the fourth founding member sold his share to people who started their own farms. Newcomb and Moutoux kindergartners carpool to school together.

It's a long story and it is still unfolding. We are all filled with gratitude.



Timothy's blueberry patch - the new bushes are eight years old, the old ones are 45.

Dirt Under My Nails

by Brandon Walker

I've read some Elliot Coleman before. And I still don't know a damn thing about soil blocks. I've read enough Jean Martin Fortier to believe it is conceivable to run a successful business based out of my brother's backyard. And I still don't speak French. Somehow, I learned more from the blisters on my hands and the dust in the air in my room.

In 2012, I did not show up to class, and I found out the harvest which belongs to those who do not try. Then, in the late summer and early fall of 2014 I showed up to my first farm. Carrying only my thirst and curiosity and what food my pockets could carry. It was

hard, and it was hot. I was foolishly wearing converse sneakers and walking around amidst mud and dust and compost. I didn't belong there. A far kinder soul than I, asked whether or not I wanted to come back. "Yes", foolishly I replied.

Not coming from a farming background by way of parents and not having a farming background by way of degree; in the world of agriculture I don't stand a chance. Why should I continue to do this to myself, and arguably I shouldn't. I suppose I'm in it for the consequence upon my character. Or, waiting to find out what qualities from many hours spent out of doors will do. What kindnesses could be generated

from the dirt under my nails. What inner light might be generated from being sunburnt, windblown, rain cold and bone tired. Perhaps nothing; I read Emerson on occasion, that alone does not make me self-reliant.

Every time I show up to work, the real thing I am farming is a thing called myself. There's something about dirt and sweat and the savoring of labor and the sweetness of food. Something that breaks and something that builds. Something solitary and something bonding. If nothing became of me and my farming career but a wider mind and open heart, I should still look at the ground everyday and say "Thank You" for all the rest of them.

Farmhouse Sitting

by Helen Roades

For the past two weeks, I've been living on the Vienna farm in Carrie's house, dog sitting and house sitting while she and her family take their three week long summer road trip. Living on the farm is not an opportunity that is afforded to every farm worker -- like the rest of Northern Virginia, affordable housing here is in short supply and most Vienna workers commute to the farm on a daily basis. Myself included. Granted, as a Town of Vienna local, I certainly have the shortest and easiest commute of all. But living on the farm has let me experience this place through a totally new lens, and I've found even more to love about it. So with this short article, I'm setting out to create a non-exhaustive list of beautiful little things I've noticed during my stay that bring me so much joy. Here goes:

- How much louder the birds are right after a summer storm lets up
- Using the "is the gate open?" system to guess who might be awake early, or out late at night



photos courtesy of helen roades

- Running into Hana plugging away on the tractor during day-off walks
- Surprise post-market house visits from farmer pals
- Spotting baby Mika out the window in the blueberry patch at any time of day imaginable
- The loud darkness of the night time while the tree frogs sing their songs
- A post-work day dip in the pool to wash the sweat and dirt away
- Speedy fast hiking through the section of the forest advertising "Caution! Hunting in progress!"
- After dinner porch chats with Rachel, once the heat of the day has subsided
- Stepping outside with the dogs first thing in the morning, before sunup, when the air is already thick with humidity but the pale light doesn't burn yet
- Every single kind of clover in its beauty (pink clover and white clover especially)
- Finding dinner inspiration with a quick walk-in cooler grocery shopping trip
- Fifteen more minutes of sleep each morning
- Instant gratification for blueberry cravings
- Daddy longlegs making their home in the shower, and the way their webs glisten with water droplets

And that's all my post market brain can come up with. Many, but not all, of the things that make me smile, the things that I am going to miss so much when I have to go back home next week. It'll sure be nice to sleep in my own bed again. But this place feels so much like home to me, it's hard to say I've missed my other one at all.



Farmers Reading

What do farmers do when they aren't farming? Sometimes they read books about farming. What follows is an expression of delight from Ciara, as told to Oscar [who interjects once or twice with some facts from penguin.co.uk], about their book du jour, a Sunday Times Nature Book of the Year.

This book that I'm reading right now, "English Pastoral: An Inheritance" by James Rebanks, that's the American edition; the British title is "Pastoral Song." Okay, so, James is a shepherd in the Lake District of England who wrote a book a few years ago called "The Shepherd's Life," which was one of my favorite books at the time. I was instantly obsessed with that part of England and the particular breeds of sheep they're herding [Herdwick] and the mixed-use rotational livestock farm style. The story shares anecdotes about collective grazing of sheep herds and how this compliments the other efforts of their farming. There's still communal land where people collectively graze their sheep herds. It's a place where the commons exists! In this second book, he really explores the traditional farm education he received from his grandfather and living on a farm. As he witnessed the farms around him change: industrialized, mechanized and unified. Rebanks' writing style reveals someone who likely has a mind that's always going and does his research, weaving in details how modern farming has gone wrong. As he grappled with his inheritance, he worked to revert his family farm to more traditional methods and experienced successful farming. [Sidenote: Rebanks' family has lived and worked in the Lake District for over 600 years!] I don't know the economic realities of his life, but when I read about his farming and his style, I feel enthusiastic about his efforts. It's inspiring. I've been surprised about all the similarities between his farming education and upbringing and mine, despite them being so, so different. He grew up on a farm in England. I grew up in the suburbs of Virginia, coming to farming 10 or 11 years ago. Yet when he's describing the lessons he learned from his grandfather, I relate to so many of them. Like following a mentor around a field or experiencing small moments of wildlife. Learning the vernacular that farmers use when they exist within a community. Reading this book and knowing about the struggles farmers around the world experience, I'm grateful to exist in this farming community, the wider network in the Mid-Atlantic and specifically in Loudoun County, Virginia, because I don't think we're supposed to do this alone.



paintings by rachel udall

Above: Blueberry netting going up.
Below: Pulling Remy, together.

