

STUDENT ORGANIC FARM CSA NEWSLETTER

December 16, 2004

The last week of Fall CSA

In your share this week:

(bulked out to tide you over the break)

- Salad: last bag of the season of the world-famous gourmet Student Organic Farm Baby Salad Mix
- *Sweet dumpling* or *Delicata* **winter squash**
- *Super Red* **cabbage**
- *Napoli* orange **carrots**
- *Harris model* **parsnips**
- *Tadorna* **leeks**
- *Redwing* red **onions**
- Garlic
- *Joan* **rutabagas**
- *Hakurei* or *Scarlet Queen* **turnips** **note: the turnips have gotten frostbitten. This means two things: they won't store well, and they're much better for cooking than for fresh eating. So use up those turnips early this week, in turnip soup, in stew, in roasted roots, etc.*
- *Diablo* **Brussels sprouts**
- *Zefa Fino* **bulb fennel**
- Optional at the farm, already harvested: **kale, chard, beets**
- Optional for U-pickers: more Brussels sprouts, parsnips, greens **note: if you want to harvest, be prepared for cold and mud!**
- **Note on optional extras:** Until further notice, there is *always* extra rutabagas, turnips, kale, Brussels sprouts and Brussels greens. Just ask a student farmer at CSA pick-up. There may occasionally be extras of other crops, but staple crops like carrots and potatoes we have to ration to be sure there is plenty for all 50 shares all winter.

Announcements

1. This is the last week of Fall CSA, as you know. We have enjoyed growing your food and getting to know you. I've felt a bit removed this fall, as Jeremy's very capably taken over Thursday CSA day, and I've been home most Thursdays, but I still think of you all, often, and hope you're enjoying all your produce. For those of you moving on, thank you so much for giving us the opportunity to grow food for you and teach students and community members about organic production, season extension, and local food systems. I hope all goes well for you in the next chapter of your life, and perhaps we'll see you around. For those of you who have rejoined for winter/spring, same goes (thanks!). We look forward to seeing you on Jan. 13, same time, same place. Check your real mail AND your email between now and then for a Member Registration and Agreement Form to fill out and return to us, as well as a reminder about next session's start dates

2. Congratulations and farewell to Joe “bo” Redmond! Joe is graduating this December, and moving on, first to his family’s house in Dexter, then out to California, with potential plans for business school, and opening his own biodynamic vineyard and wine business. Joe was responsible for the potato planting at the farm this year, among other things, so while you enjoy your spuds this winter, keep Joe in mind. ☺ We’ll miss you, Goaty.

3. See below, under “odds and ends” for an idea we’re cooking up for a Core Group of members to help make decisions and be a consistent force on the farm, starting next year.

4. WINTER VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITY: TRAINING ON FRIDAY, DEC. 17 FOR WINTER VOLUNTEERS. Call the farm phone to confirm attendance at training if you plan to pitch in over break. CSA will take a break, and student farmers will be away, from mid-December to mid-January, while MSU takes its winter break. We need volunteers to open and close up hoopouses on sunny days, water if necessary, shovel out walks, check mousetraps, and keep an eye on things while we’re gone. Can you sign up for one or more days? You may not even need to come in – if it’s cold and cloudy, we leave the hoopouses closed all day, and we don’t water. But just in case we get sunny days, we need folks available to ventilate and water, so please sign up to be “on call,” depending on the weather, for one or two (or more) days this winter. We will show you what to do – it’s not too hard. Please check your calendar, and call the farm phone (517-230-7987) and/or sign up at CSA pick-up today.

What’s up at the farm?

The year in review:

January-February: We started this year (2004) shooting from the hip during our first official season of winter farming. Our members got inundated with cabbage, as we’d overestimated the amount that a) would do well in the field, b) would store well, and c) that folks would actually want. Several folks commented that this was their first experience with seasonal eating, even if we were extending the season a bit more than usual. The Asian greens did beautifully through the winter, and we learned a bit about timing of fall plantings to increase winter harvests. We hosted a visit from John’s winter farming guru, Eliot Coleman. Student farmers attended both the Northern Michigan Small Farms Conference in Gaylord, MI, and the Upper Midwest Organic Farming Conference in LaCrosse, WI.

March-April: was the start of spring – we’d planted like mad in the hoopouses in February, and kept it up through April. We started planting in the fields in late April (peas, onions, leeks, radishes, and other early crops). Lots of MSU and LCC classes came to visit this spring, for field trips, tours, and labs.

May-June: was the start of the “Summer” CSA session. We increased membership from 25 to 50 this summer, pretty successfully so far. We saw the first major harvests from the late-winter plantings in the hoopouses at this time, as well as wet, soggy fields. This spring was also notable for the departure of a few key SOFers who’d helped start this whole project: Beverly, Oriana, and Lynn, the farm mom, all graduated, leaving behind the start of a project that will continue to grow and change well after they’re gone from Lansing, perhaps even from this earth. Once the remaining SOFers finished classes, we held the first annual

Cabbage Bowling Tournament, and started our first season of full-time interns working on the farm.

July-August: The farm's in full swing! Summer plantings mostly finished in the fields, and harvest from the hoopouses tapered off, attention turning to the fields. A few highlights: Enormous tomato transplants planted with post-hole diggers, the never-ending irrigation system installation, the decision that a tractor-drawn tiller wasn't that bad after all, biodynamic radish planting trials, and of course.... the flies. We received a "gift" of huge loads of unfinished compost, which will be a great thing for our fields in the future, but unfortunately introduced a neverending population of flies to the farm for the season. We bid congratulations and farewell to Mookie, the last remaining founding student farmer who helped build the place, literally, from the ground up.

September-October: The late summer we'd wanted in July finally showed up, drawing out the time of tomatoes and peppers and eggplants. We welcomed Jeremy on as the new Farm Co-Manager! With the start of classes came a batch of new student farmers, excited to learn and work, who were thrown into the fray with not much warning or preparation. They took it pretty well –most of them are still around to tell the story. We also started the fall CSA session with a new batch of members, most of whom also lived to tell about it. The fall is really the boom season at the farm, since it captures most of the summer crops as well as the cool-season and storage crops – good timing, you all! Thanks to Melissa, all the fall plantings for winter harvest went into the ground on time, or even early, and plants grew beautifully during the unseasonably warm and sunny fall. Student farmers attended both Bioneers conference in Traverse City and the Community Food Security Conference in Madison, WI. More classes from MSU and LCC came to learn about CSA, organic farming, and season extension.

November-December: finally, winter! Even though we're growing and distributing produce clear through the winter, it's still the time to hibernate, rest and recuperate from a long season, and make plans for the next year, which in our case starts in about a month. We've moved into Persephone, the dark period, and we'll be there til early February, when the plants will once again have enough light to grow. Until then, your produce comes from two coolers: the walk-in in the building, and the "living refrigerators" that are the hoopouses in winter. Plantings went into the ground earlier this fall right on schedule, and everything looks good going into the cold, dark season – we're all curious to see how they do! We attended the first CSA Conference in Tustin, MI, as well as the Grand Rapids Fruit and Vegetable Expo. During the break between semesters, CSA members generously donated their time and hard work to keep the farm going – opening and closing hoopouses, watering, checking mousetraps, shoveling doorways, and keeping an eye on the place (this could be you! History in the making....).

And just a few odds and ends:

CSA Core Group Opportunity: Do you want to have a voice in your farm? Have ideas for new crops? Enjoy organizing and working with other members? We want to develop a **core group** of CSA members to help run the farm. The point is to strengthen the ties between farmers and members, and give the members more say in what happens on the farm. We'd like about 10 people to start – or more if there's interest and commitment. The role of the core group differs from farm to farm, but one unifying theme among successful CSA farms is that they *have* a core group. While we very much enjoy growing produce for you, the *community* part of our CSA

needs strengthening if we're to remain a viable project. There are so many ideas in the pipeline for the development of the Student Organic Farm, just one of which is CSA. The nature of the SOF is that the management and labor are transient – all students. If the CSA develops a strong, member-driven decision-making body, it can remain strong for years to come, through generations of student farmers. Stay tuned in January for info on how to join the Core Group of CSA members!

Squash was a sad story at the farm this year. It starts way back in the spring, when the ground was so very wet and the temperatures were so cold for so long in spring. We had squash transplants bursting at the seams of their pots to get out, out of the greenhouse and into the ground. Lots of the plants got stressed during that time; some died. When we finally did get them into the ground, they took a while to recover from the stress of hanging out in pots so long. Their compromised state made them a perfect target for the striped cucumber beetle (who enjoys all members of the Cucurbit family, including squash) and for powdery mildew. As a rule of thumb, pests attack weakened or unhealthy plants before strong, healthy ones. So the pests had a field day with the squash. As a result, we had even fewer, and less healthy plants, which meant fewer squash with less time to ripen before the frost. For you, this means fewer squash per share this year.

What can we do about that next year? Well, a couple of things. First, we'll try to prevent the rootbound, stressed plants by seeding all the transplants later. Or we'll cover our bases and plant two, staggered rounds of squash transplants, in order to have some plants ready early, in case we *are* able to work the ground and plant as early as we'd like to. Healthy plants at all stages go a long way in preventing loss to pests. We're going to try out some new varieties of squash that are bred to be resistant to powdery mildew. We can also look into organic pest control for the cucumber beetles – there are a few organic approved sprays that can control the beetles, but this is a last resort. In keeping with the organic philosophy, the first line of defense is one of offense – create a healthy system with no cracks for disease or pests to get in in the first place. We'll continue adding organic matter in the form of compost, organic mulches, and cover crops to our fields, increasing the biodiversity of the soil and creating a more stable and resilient soil ecosystem, which provides plants with the resources they need to remain healthy and less desirable to pests. We'll try to minimize compaction of the soil by driving on it as little as possible, and only when it's dry enough to handle it. Maybe we'll even fine tune our operation enough to plant and harvest by the cycle of the moon, like the old folks did. We'll keep you posted on the squash and the rest of the farm as the year unfolds. The beauty of CSA, you've probably experienced by now, is that even if the squash is not so hot this year, the carrots, parsnips, leeks, salad, and potatoes, to name just a few, have done beautifully. Next year, the squash will likely do well, and maybe something else will have an off year. That's the nature of a diverse system – there's natural ebbs and flows, and the changes keep us on our toes. I hope you're enjoying the culinary adventure of this agricultural year.

New Veggies and Recipes

New this week (to some folks) is bulb fennel. This delicately anise-flavored member of the Umbelliferae family (relative to carrot, parsley, celery, and dill to name just a few) is sweet and crunchy – if you are a licorice lover, you will love fennel. Even if you are not a licorice lover, give it a try—the flavor is subtle and sweeter and more complex than just licorice. I like to break off a stalk and eat it like fresh celery – the stalk, foliage, and swollen stem base (the “bulb”) are all edible and useable. You probably remember the leafy, feathery greens in your

Thanksgiving shares; those were the tops of the bulbs you'll receive today. There are still some green leaves left on the bulbs, however; so if you like, you can hang or dehydrate them to dry for storage. Fennel leaf is delicious in salad dressing, especially fresh. Try it in anything where you'd use dill weed. Besides fresh eating, fennel stalks and bulbs may be used any way you use celery – cut up in salad (it's especially delectable in potato salad, as a little surprise!), cooked in soup, stirfried, or, my favorite: added to scalloped potatoes. Slice big chunks of fennel bulb into similar sized slices as your potatoes for scalloped potatoes (about 1/8" or so). Alternate layers with the potatoes, and cover everything with olive oil and a grated hard cheese, like Parmesan or Asiago, and bake til everything is tender and browned. If you're the recipe type, check a scalloped potato recipe first for ratios and times. Once you've decided you're a fennel aficionado, you can leave the potatoes out entirely – the flavors of fennel and hard, semi-pungent cheese compliment each other perfectly, esp. with a generous dose of black pepper (and possibly a splash of dry white wine? I just made that up – try at your own risk).

The only other less-than-familiar item in your share this week is parsnips, and you've seen those before, just not many. They're also an Umbelliferae member (noticing a trend? Seems like the Umbels and Brassicas are the stars of winter production), only this time it's the root, and NOT the above-ground parts, that we eat. Prepare parsnips any way you use carrots – they're a little fibrous for fresh eating, as in "parsnip sticks," but some folks still like them that way – the flavor is sweet and yummy—and you can certainly steam, stirfry, roast, or soup/stew.

Interesting parsnip factoid: Some people with sensitive skin can actually develop a rash from handling parsnip greens and then exposing their skin to sunlight. No such risk with the roots, though. I've never gotten it, and I've handled many parsnip greens in full sun, but I just thought you'd like to know – that's partly why we don't bunch your parsnips with leaves attached.

So, what to do with all those roots? If you're rejoining us for winter/spring (and most folks are! Out of 50 shares, we only had 11 openings for new members after you all renewed), you'll have a month off from CSA. Perhaps that's a relief (is your fridge still full of last week's carrots?), or a bummer (does that mean you'll have to fill in the gaps with produce from the co-op or supermarket?). In any case, you'll get a nice big share today to tide you over at least a little while over break.

Storage tips: Note on **turnips**: The turnips this week got frostbitten. This means two things: they won't store well, and they're much better for cooking than for fresh eating. So use up those turnips early this week, in turnip soup, in stew, in roasted roots, etc. That said, almost all never-frozen **root veggies** will store for weeks, often months, in a normal refrigerator drawer. Whether you put them in a plastic bag depends on how wet they are when you store them (wet produce in a plastic bag can get slimy pretty quick), and how long you intend to keep them there. Carrots, beets, parsnips, and rutabagas (all without greens) will all store great in plastic bags, if they are dry when you put them in there. I've had beets in the fridge for three or four months that were still fine when I finally took them out and used them. Potatoes will store in the fridge, too. They actually like it pretty moist (80-90% relative humidity) but make sure they're not sitting in a puddle of water. If you have a cool basement (cold, really – a garage or porch that *stays above freezing* is better), you can store your root veggies there, either in a five-gallon bucket with a lid (to maintain humidity) or in an insulated cooler, closed (in case you think it just might freeze and thaw). Fluctuating temperatures which freeze and then thaw your produce will

reduce the roots' storage life dramatically, but they'll still be fine for cooking if you use them soon after the freeze-thaw.

Cabbage is another superstar storage vegetable. Simply put a clean, dry head into a plastic bag, close, and store in the fridge. As a CSA member, you'll receive plenty more cabbage over the winter and early spring, so there's no need to ration cabbage. If you wanted to, though, for example, if you wanted to save up cabbage heads to make a big batch of kraut, you can stick them in the fridge and ignore it. If the outer leaves dry or turn yellow, simply peel them off to reveal clean, fresh, pretty leaves within.

Leeks, Collards, Brussels sprouts, and Brussels greens are medium-good storage veggies. Wrapped in plastic in your refrigerator, they should keep a few weeks – perhaps the leaves will start to yellow before then, so keep an eye on them if you don't use them this week. The sprouts will last longer; they may turn yellow on the outside, like little cabbages, but you can peel off the outer leaves, like a cabbage, and use them. Same with leeks – peel off any yucky outer leaves, trim the green ends, and the inside should be good to use.

Kale, and chard don't keep as well – you probably know that by now. Wrapped in plastic, they'll easily keep a week if necessary, but then the kale starts to yellow, and the chard starts to wilt or turn to mush. If you have freezer space, the best thing to do with kale and chard (and collards and Brussels for that matter) is to blanch them and freeze them. I've also heard of folks dehydrating the leaves, pulverizing them, and using the powder as part of a soup base.

Last but not least, **garlic** and **winter squash** are excellent keepers. They like cool, *dry* conditions (i.e. not the refrigerator) – if you have a dry basement, or an insulated-but-not-heated attic, they'll like it there. The best thing to do with squash, if you plan not to eat it in the next few weeks, is to wipe it clean with a very dilute (5-10%) bleach solution. The bleach kills any microbes that were considering rotting the skin of your squash, but is not concentrated enough to get into the flesh that you want to eat. This might be a little neurotic; I've stored squash with the dirt still on it in my dining room for several months with little to no rot, but it couldn't hurt.

Ok, phew. If you've made it this far, thank you so much for reading. I do hope it's helpful. I will be thinking of you all this winter, while I start writing my thesis, much of which is the story of the farm's evolution. Ideas? Anything I absolutely positively can't leave out? Be well, Michelle