

THE RHETORICAL ROOT

A farm newsletter



Tucked In for the Winter

Fall provides a bumper crop before we close the chapter on 2020 growing season

Poultry Numbers Bolstered by New Chicks, Old Hens

Baby "E" To Arrive Soon!

EVALUATING THE SEASONAL GROWING MODEL

The cover picture accurately sums up how André and I were feeling by the time winter squash harvest rolled around --basking in the bounty, but oh-so-exhausted. This season we both added more CSA shares and started going to another market, all with little extra hired help and my being pregnant! Looking back, it's a wonder we survived. Now, the garden rests. All landscape fabric and water lines are out. Many crop remnants are still in the ground, but we hope to soon chop them up with our flail mower rather than pull them out. The more organic matter we can leave out there, the better! We recently sent soil samples off to be analyzed so that we can fertilize and amend appropriately next season.

Growing seasonally in a northern climate allows for winter rest & rejuvenation, but it also means that we have to squeeze every last drop out of summer's growing potential. The pressure to produce in summer is intense, whereas growing earlier and later into the shoulder seasons eases the need to earn a year's worth of income in 6 months. Seasonal growing also means that we have to look off the farm for work during the winter months. Exploring whether or not it pencils out to put up heated greenhouses is something we think about often. I often wonder if it would leave us more or less burnt out if we extended our season.

Overall, we enjoyed a bountiful 3rd year, but the hot, dry weather created a multitude of challenges, and we were disappointed with how some crops performed. Each new year brings new opportunities to learn and improve. Covid-19 looked like it would jeopardize our market outlets, but in the end it only ended up helping us, as we saw an increased demand for local food when the grocery stores started having shortages. We still don't know what the future holds--especially as we anticipate adding to our family! But as farmer's, we are accustomed to uncertainty. One thing we know for certain is that if we plant seeds, plants will grow and that people will always need food. And that's enough to keep us going.



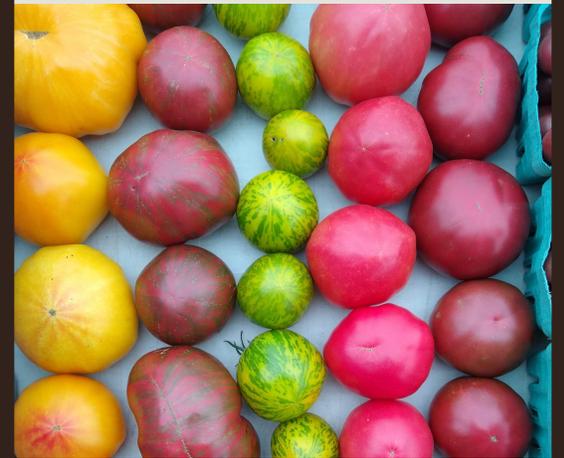
AUTUMN = BOUNTY

We've noticed that once school starts, many farmer's market customers drop off. And once late September rolls around, most home gardeners have tilled their plots under. The perception that the season for fresh local produce is over once the first little frost comes couldn't be further from the truth! The cool fall months are a welcome gift to gardeners, and it's not only because we get a reprieve from the sweltering summer sun, Autumn is like a second spring. Crops like lettuce, radish, and spinach, which are challenging to impossible to grow in the summer, suddenly start to thrive again. Not only are long-season crops like squash, sweet potatoes, and brussels sprouts finally ready, but customers also have access to cold-hearty crops like brassicas and roots as well as weather-sensitive crops like radish and spinach. Once the overnight temps start to really drop, it certainly does take some active management to keep them alive, but it can be done! It can also be a challenge, we've found, to get some of these cool-loving crops started in the heat of July and August so that they're ready by September, but with the addition of shade cloth, we made strides in that department as well. At Prairie Roots, we continue to tweak our strategies to reach autumn's full potential for bounty.



A bountiful September share

SPOTLIGHT ON TOMATOES



Tomatoes are a cornerstone of farmer's market stands, and this year we were blessed with a wonderful tomato crop that lasted a good 3.5 months. We moved most of our tomatoes from outside into 2 of our 3 caterpillar tunnels, which helped immensely. Here is how we grow great tomatoes:

- Start with healthy, thick-stemmed transplants. Plant 18" in apart in raised beds with a handful of pelleted chicken manure

- Prune heavily by pinching suckers weekly until the plants really take off and we can no longer keep up with them. Prune all bottom leaves off so nothing touches the ground

- Support leaders by fastening them to a vertical twine with tomato clips. Once they start to branch, support with horizontal twine as well to create a "cage"

- Fertilize with Neptune's Harvest Rose and Flowering formula once fruit has set. This helps ripen the fruit instead of encouraging more foliage.



Barn Buddies

In late August, we got a batch of 75 layer chicks, and then in October we took 100 of Andre's uncle's old laying hens. The old hens have taken up residence in the lamb barn. While they don't give us many eggs, they supply enough to get us through winter until the pullets start this spring. These hens will become soup birds, but for now they liven up the yard on otherwise gloomy, chilly days. Meanwhile, in the neighboring barn, our ewes are mingling with a young ram that came to visit. Lambs again in 150 days!?



Greta inspects our garlic beds, freshly insulated with a layer of straw. We have 1,600 cloves planted this fall. It seems like a lot, but when we count back what we need for the following year's seed, it's just enough for shares, fall markets, and ourselves. We love garlic because it can be sold early as "green garlic" and garlic scapes, and also cured and stored through the fall and winter. We grow two hardneck varieties--one giant and one potent purple variety. We also grow one softneck type. We love garlic and eat it daily!



BABY "E" TO ARRIVE SOON!

In less than a month, we will be bringing our first child home from the hospital. Even though starting a family is something we prayerfully considered, waves of disbelief overwhelm us constantly as the due date approaches. Are we ready for life to change so permanently and drastically? How can this life be growing inside of me? Is this a good time to bring new life into the world?

Practically, there are many things to consider about the future. Will our busy summer lifestyle be able to accommodate a newborn? How much extra babysitting and farm help will we need? How cautious should we be about seeing other people during the pandemic? All these questions will need to be addressed in time, but for now we are just focusing on joyfully preparing our hearts and home for little bean's safe arrival.



CSA 2021 INFO TO BE RELEASED IN JANUARY

Starting in December, we spend a good deal of time assessing the previous year and planning for the next growing season. This is when we take the time to update the website and make tweaks to how our CSA will operate. Once we've figured out how many shares to plan for, what the price will be, and how boxes will be distributed, we open up our shares for sale! Former customers and people on our newsletter mailing list will receive sign-up info first, followed by social media, then fliers and advertisements as needed. Based on last season, we expect a strong response. Even if we up our number of shares a little, there is a good chance we'll sell out, so don't wait too long!

CSA shares are a great way to support local growers for those who love to cook, and splitting a share with family or a friend is a great option if you just want to try it out!



What's next?

Fall is a season of transition for us. We switch rather abruptly from the unrelenting pace of CSA box distribution and farmer's markets to sleeping in and enjoying long, hearty breakfasts. While we still have a few roots and tunnel greens for ourselves to enjoy, we must turn to other projects and profitable endeavors. This year, I've been focused on home improvement and neglected cleaning projects until the baby arrives, then the rest of the winter will be spent as a full-time new mom. I have also been making new soaps to sell for the holidays and summer markets.

For Andre's part, he's been splitting time between projects here, like building a mobile chicken coop and cleaning up the garden, with helping his dad at the dairy. We are enjoying this slower pace of life, but we find there is always still plenty to do!