Red Fire Reader

A monthly newsletter from Red Fire Farm, growers of healthy organic food for communities in Massachusetts

GRANBY, MASSACHUSETTS 01033 (413) 467-SOIL JULY 7TH, 2009 ISSUE NUMBER II

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CALENDAR:

July 10th : Come taste Ed Parker's local maple syrup and pick up seasonal recipes. Granby Farm Stand 3-6PM
July 10th: Ona's cooking demo at the Cambridge Harvest Co-op
July 14th: Ona's cooking demo at the Springfield X Farmers Market/CSA distribution.
July 21st : Ona's cooking demo at the Granby CSA
July 29th : Ona's cooking demo at the Commonwealth CSA, Greenfield.
July 31st: Ann Starboard from Crystal Brook Goat Cheese will be sampling chevre in the Granby Farmstand, 3-6PM.

IN SEASON IN JULY

basil~lettuce ~ radishes ~ beets ~carrots ~ kale ~ mesclun greens ~ cilantro ~ garlic ~ herbs ~ onions ~ potatoes ~ cabbage ~ basil~ summer squash ~ cucumbers ~ beans ~ eggplant~ melons~ onions ~ sweet corn ~ blueberries

FROM THE GREENHOUSE

~ peppers ~ cherry tomatoes ~ tomatoes~

Red Fire Farm has some major news to announce. Some of you know that Red Fire Farm fields are located up and down the roads around Granby ranging up to a mile away from the home farm. I own the 50 acres that surround us now, but only about 15 of this acreage is cultivatable, the rest being rocky pasture or to wet for crops. Most of our vegetable crop fields are rented by the farm from other landowners, including especially our two best fields that amount to about 25 acres of prime soil. These two fields are the core of our current vegetable rotation. Unfortunately, despite years of efforts to purchase this property, or at least to work out a long term lease for these fields, we still have not been able to agree with the land owners on a price that would make the purchase of this land affordable for farming. Realizing this reality last winter, Sarah and I began an extensive search for other land on which we could eventually move the core of our vegetable farming onto. We are delighted to announce that we found a 110 acre APR protected (from development) farm in Montague MA. This farm has 40 acres of prime vegetable land on the shores of the Connecticut River (mostly Hadley Sandy Loam, considered the best soil type in the world for vegetable farming). We have been carefully writing up business plans for the last few months, and our bank First Pioneer Farm Credit just approved a new mortgage of about $560,000 in order for us to purchase this farm. On June 19th, the sale was officially finalized and the deed changed hands from the elderly Carol Crafts who inherited the farm from her farming family to us. A sale is also pending for the adjacent old Blue Meadow Farm property to Red Fire Farm. If this goes through it will give us several state of the art greenhouses in Montague as well as some additional barns and an office.

This represents a major new challenge for Red Fire Farm. Over the next few years we will be transitioning the land in Montague to Organic by growing soil improving cover crops and not applying any prohibited fertilizers or pesticides. In 2011 we will begin growing vegetables in Montague. We will not stop growing crops in Granby, and the stand will continue to be here, but in the long term, 75% of our field crops will be grown on the Montague farm. This will be a big change for our crew (as eventually we will have two crews, one in Granby, and one in Montague.) Sarah and I will eventually be moving to the farmhouse in Montague to oversee the farm there and to start a family. We will be challenged by the size of our new mortgage, and currently are investigating the possibility of making the farmland ownership into a non-profit land trust, thus allowing us to begin a fundraising campaign to pay off the debt. We need partners to help us figure out this process.

We are very sad about the possibility that the Shyloski fields here in Granby, which currently yield such bountiful crops, may be turned into houses. We hold out hope that a solution may still be reached with the owners that will allow these fields to stay in agriculture, but thanks to the land in Montague, we are relieved that Red Fire Farm will be able to continue in one form or another.

-Ryan

Easy Beets

1 bunch beets, greens removed
1-2 pearl onions
2 Tbs. vinegar of choice
1 tsp salt
1 Tbs. cumin seed (opt)

Boil the beets in a small, lidded sauce pan until a fork goes in easily (~30 min). Drain and dump the beets in a bowl of cold water. Slip the skins off by rubbing them around in your hands (if you do this under the water, you shouldn't splatter beet juice all over the kitchen). Slice into bite-sized pieces. Mix in additional ingredients and chill for 1 hour, stirring occasionally.

Cold Cucumber Soup

5-6 cucumbers (peel if desired)
2 cups milk
1 cup sour cream
2 Tbs. chopped dill
1 Tbs. salt
2-3 cloves garlic
1 tsp. minced mint
1 Tbs. vinegar
black pepper to taste

Place all but one cucumber in the blender and process until smooth. Chop remaining cucumber and add. Chill.

ZUCCHINI AND HERB FRITTERS

4 medium zucchini, grated coarsely
1 medium yellow onion, grated coarsely
3 garlic cloves, finely minced or garlic, to taste
½ cup flour
3 eggs, lightly beaten
1/2 tsp fresh ground black pepper, to taste
1 Tbs fresh mint, finely chopped
1 cup Greek yogurt or sour cream
olive oil, for shallow frying
2 Tbs fresh basil, finely chopped
1 Tbs fresh mint, finely chopped
sea salt, to taste

Squeeze all the excess liquid from the zucchini, onion and garlic. One method is to put the vegetables into a small colander or sieve, place this on or over the sink and press down on the vegetables several times. Combine the zucchini, onion, garlic, flour, egg, mint, basil, pepper and salt in a large bowl.

Pre-heat the oven to 425-450°F. Heat oil in a large, preferably non-stick pan, and shallow-fry level tablespoons of the mixture, until the fritters are browned on both sides, place on paper kitchen toweling to absorb excess oil then transfer the fritters to oven trays and bake uncovered for about 10 minutes or until they are crisped and cooked right through.

Combine the yoghurt and extra mint.

Serve the fritters immediately with the yoghurt and mint on top

Tillage and Farming :

Recently on the farm, I overheard a crew member, refering to a recently turned field as having just been "tilled". I kind of cringed when I heard that, as generally I consider tilling to be detrimental to the health of the soil. This is true particularly when one is talking about the type of tiller such as the troy bilt or other rototillers that people tend to use in their back yard gardens. Those types of tillers tend to turn real fast, churning and beating apart the soil clods and completely pulverizing the soil. Over time this is bad for the soil as the organic matter breaks down at an accelerated rate, the soil microorganisms including especially the mycorrhizal fungi are disturbed, and eventually this encourages the depletion of the soils ability to hold water and nutrients.

When we work the soil at Red Fire Farm we try to use gentler forms of tillage that minimize the damage that can happen from overly aggressive tilling machines. At the same time we find that a certain amount of tillage is necessary for vegetable farming so that we can turn in cover crops, get seed beds ready and kill weeds that might otherwise overtake the crops. So we must balance the negative long term effects of tillage with the short term benefits of tillage.

When we do work the soil to get it ready for growing vegetables we usually start with a spading machine which gently turns the soil without completely pulverizing the clods. On our rocky ground or in certain situations we use a chisel plow (also known as a ripper) which is just a big shank that cuts through the soil but doesn't flip the profile. Studies have shown that these tools are much better for the soil in the long run compared to the alternatives of a rotavator, moldboard plow or disk harrow, all of which tend to form compaction and damage to soil structure.

In many situations as our vegetable crops grow we try to minimize the amount of additional cultivation induced soil disturbance that we have to do to kill

weeds. We have moved on many crops to using straw or hay mulch to suppress weeds instead of weekly cultivation.

In other cases we plant non competitive companion cover crops between the vegetable plants that help out compete those pesky weeds.

In the future we are planning to participate in some research trials with UMass and Cornell University extension where we will try to minimize tillage even more. In these trials we are planning to use a special ripper to open only a narrow slit into a field of mowed cover crop residue. We will then transplant our crops into this little strip of prepared ground. The crop will then grow without ever having had to open up 90% of the field space.

The trick will be to see if we can arrange to have enough biomass on the surface to prevent weeds from growing, as the surface residue will make it impossible for us to fall back on cultivating to kill weeds should they break through. Conventional no till farmers get around this problem by using an herbicide, but as organic farmers we have other reasons for wanting to avoid ever using chemical herbicides on our fields.

-Ryan

What's the deal with bulk orders?

You can order extra vegetables, to eat or preserve, and we'll deliver them to your share pickup location. We offer bulk purchase of the produce that we have a lot of on the farm throughout the season, so the list will grow and change. Please call and ask if you're interested in bulk ordering any seasonal produce that's not on the list.

HOW TO ORDER

Info to include in your order: Please e-mail your orders to bulkorders@redfirefarm.com, including in your message:

1. your name,
2. phone number,
3. how much of each thing you want
4. and your share pickup location.

Ordering in time for your pickup: If you get your order in two days before your scheduled pickup, we'll bring it then, as long as supplies last; if it comes in later, or we run out of produce that week, it will come the next week. (Place orders by Mon. pm for Wednesday distributions; by Tuesday pm for Thursday distributions; by Wed. pm for Friday distributions; and by Sunday pm for Tuesday distributions) Orders are first-come first-served until we run out of the bounty. Please make sure to note if you want us to contact you in the case that we can't fill your order (and leave your contact info).

HOW TO PICK UP

Bring a check or the exact amount in cash to your CSA pickup The coordinators don't have a way to make change, so please bring the exact amount for your order. Checks are best. Then ask the coordinator for your order and give them your payment.

Please don't forget to pick up your bulk order, because it will end up going to food relief, you'll lose the veggies, and we'll lose produce we might have been able to sell elsewhere.

FOR FOLKS WHO AREN'T CSA MEMBERS

You can order bulk veggies and pick them up at any of our distribution locations during the distribution hours (or at the farmstand anytime), just let us know which one, and make sure to be there. Distribution locations and times are on our website.

If items are in short supply, we'll fill CSA member orders first.

BULK ITEMS AVAILABLE:
PICKLING CUKES - $30 per half bushel (about 20 lbs)
SUMMER SQUASH/ZUCCHINI - $30 per half bushel
FRESH GARLIC - $1.50 per bulb
DILL - $1.25 per bunch
Coming Soon: Basil

PYO Update:

July will see the opening of the bean patch early in the month and the flowers, cherry tomatoes and tomatilloes by the end of the month. Currently, there are still three types of peas and lots of herbs including basil for picking at the farm. Check your weekly email and the board in the farm stand for current availability and picking amounts.

Green Sleeves for Flower Lovers

If you buy a bouquet from the market or the farmstand, or have signed up for the flower share, the plastic sleeve that your bouquet is wrapped in is 100% biodegradable! The sleeves are made of PLA (corn plastic) which means they will breakdown in commercial composting facilities, though maybe not in your backyard compost pile.

FARM CAM: **Hatch Field**

Hatch it is a busy place to be these days. The kale, cabbages, summer squash and cucumbers that have been in your shares for the past couple of weeks have all come from this field. There have been field crews mulching, staking and stringing the tomatoes in Hatch Field every day for weeks. Luckily, the field has pretty good drainage and there has been minimal crop loss even with all the rain we've had.

Hannah stringing tomatoes

The Red Fire Reader is compiled and edited by Ona Lindauer, the Red Fire Farm culinary intern. Newsletter topic ideas, recipes, writings, poems, and CSA community announcements are welcome and should be submitted to thefarmers@redfirefarm.com.

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