

Meanwhile Back at the Farm...May 24, 2001

Howdy Folks,

The weather has been nice and warm and almost too hot. We planted about 500-600 tomato plants out into the field this week and we have another 400 or so to go in the next couple of weeks. This is a lot of tomatoes folks. It will end up being something like 10 plants per person. Of course they don't all make it or all produce well but even so, most people can't keep up with three tomato plants in backyard gardens. We are seeking to make up for last year's tomato "drought" which affected the whole state. This year we wisely waited to plant out the tomatoes rather than rush them into the field early. We have been rewarded for our conservatism since those farmers who planted early lost their first planting to frost and their second plantings stunted by cold weather.

Last year people told us that Mortgage Lifter was their favorite tomato. It certainly is one of mine. They are huge and pink and have an heirloom flavor that rivals all the top contenders like Brandywine. But unlike those others this plant knows how to bust out the fruit. The name Mortgage Lifter came about because the Amish farmer who grew them was able to pay off the farm with his tomato income. It is not resistant to most diseases so its important to plant it under favorable conditions and with a really well prepared rich soil, which we made sure was available. They don't ship well either since they are so luscious. I think a very good definition of luxury is when you have so many tomatoes you can take a slab out of the middle of one of these big mothers, cover your sandwich with it and toss the rest into the compost. (okay into your salad.) Some of these Mortgage Lifters get to be 2 or 3 pounds at mid season. We planted about 200 of these babies.

This week Jacob and Bettame harvested thousands of onions and set them to cure in our corral at Matadero. We have another few thousand to harvest later in the week. You noticed last week that the necks of the plants seemed soft. This is the normal progression and when the necks soften its time to pull up the plants and lay them out to concentrate the juices from the leaves into the bulbs. We rack the onions up in layered rows with the leaves of one row covering the bulbs of the previous row. This keeps the sun from damaging the bulbs while hastening the drying out of the leaves. Eventually the leaves dry fully and we can simply twist off the dried tops leaving the familiar onion bulb for storage in bags in the barn. Curing often takes two to three weeks.

You'll also notice this week that we have young garlic for you. This garlic actually came up as volunteers from last year's crop where we didn't harvest all the bulbs. We needed the bed so we pulled the plants up early so you can have this treat. The young garlic has far less bite than the mature bulbs and it's especially good in soup. The main garlic crop isn't harvested for about another six weeks or so. It too will have to go through the curing process.

We went through and pulled up all the fava bean plants this week and came through with a bumper crop for you to enjoy. These will be the last of the season.

Wasn't that stir-fry mix great last week. There were so many different flavors. This week it's the salad that's a mix. I was worried we were going to lose this batch to the heat but it cooled off in time before forcing all this lettuce to bolt, or go to seed and get bitter. We've been eating it all week and we're not tired of it yet. I like to make a dressing of balsamic vinegar, olive oil, and horseradish when the salad is this good. It can stand up to a dressing with a strong flavor.

We have had some visitors staying with us the last few days. Noah and his wife Susanna from Ghana have been here discussing permaculture and related topics. They run a farmers' college in Ghana, which has had over 1000 graduates. They have come here to meet with me and others to plan the development of their new land in Ghana. Their hope is to make it a model of permaculture, which will transform their country's agriculture. With luck and a little funding I may be going to consult in Ghana this winter.

Wanted: Drop off Coordinators for Palo Alto and Menlo Park! Due to the recent flood of new members from these two towns we now have about 10 people from each place coming up to the farm to pick up food. With our impending move only a couple of months away at the most, its time we start looking for people to coordinate new drop offs. It would also make it a bit easier for those folks and reduce the amount of miles people go to pick up their food.

The drop off coordinators get a free large share in return for their work. What a coordinator does is come out to the farm, pick up the shares for their drop off and then the members come and pick up the food at their house. Usually the pick up is outside, often in the back yard of the coordinator. It isn't necessary in this sort of set up to greet each member if they can come around back of the house to pick up their share on their own.

The following week, the coordinator brings back the empty coolers and picks up the new load of full coolers. It's pretty simple. It suits people such as stay at home parents, self employed or others who can reliably come every Thursday afternoon to pick up the shares. It's also important to have a friend who can take your place on weeks when you go on vacation or out of town.

It isn't strictly necessary to have a big vehicle to do this either. We've had a number of people with simple hatch-back cars take 12-15 shares pretty easily. It's a great way to get more involved with your CSA.

I have been talking with California FarmLink, a non-profit group this week. FarmLink matches up prospective farmers with land being made available by retiring farmers. They think they have some potential sites for us to look at so I'll be checking with them on that this week and next week. Some of them are a bit farther out than I would prefer but we owe it to ourselves to check everything out.

The Food

Chinese Broccoli and Komatsuma: Vaguely related to broccoli these leaves, shoots and flowers of this veggie are all edible.

The strap shaped leaves in with it are Komatsuma

Red Mustard: Its hard to get enough of this great tasting leafy green (or red)

Lettuce: A first cutting of our spring mix.

Onions: Spring Onions- These white young onions have a bit more pungency than their red cousins. In Mexico beans are always cooked with white onions. This week we have been broiling these onions after drizzling olive oil on them. We cook them until they start to turn black and pop the melt-in-your-mouth bulbs out of their toasted skins.

Young Garlic: Although a little bit similar in appearance to the white onions the garlic has flat instead of tubular leaves.

Turnips: They have a bit more bite compared to their usual sweet nature due to the heat wave we went through. This is the last of the bunch that went through the heat wave. Remember to use the greens in stir-fry or soup. You can even mash them with potatoes.

Fava Beans: When they get this big you need to shuck them and use the beans without the pod. On the biggest beans you may also need to peel the clear cuticle off the outside of the bean.

Young Spinach: First cutting of the season. It is so tasty raw I can't see why anyone cooks it, except Popeye of course.

Nastursiums: These edible flowers are great with salad