
MY SO CALLED FARM LIFE

AUTUMN

BY CAROLINE PAM

It's a sure sign that fall is upon us when it's no longer feasible to start work in the field at 6 am because it's still pitch black outside. So we push back our start time to 7 on harvest days and 8 the rest of the time. This feels at once decadent and long overdue after so many 14-hour days. We bring an extra set of clothes to work since the cool nights make for wet, dewy mornings.

We had about two weeks of summer this year. In the middle of August, it finally stopped raining, and turned hot and dry. Our tomatoes, squash, peppers and eggplants rallied, briefly. Then it was over. By Labor Day we were ripping up plastic mulch and bundling tomato stakes to stack in the barn.

We turn our attention to cleaning garlic, shallots and cipollini onions, weeding our last successions of turnips, spinach, lettuce, and radishes, and sowing winter rye in all the newly cleared land. Broccoli, cauliflower and cabbage are busting out, we're hauling in hefty bunches of leeks, multicolor carrots and beets, and loading up the truck with crates of sweet potatoes, fennel and celeriac.

What a luxury to be able to focus on bringing in the crops without feeling behind on seeding and planting or swamped by weeds. The crisp air and deep blue skies are invigorating, the big harvests rewarding, and our flagging energy and good humor start to return.

It's been a challenging season up to now. For the second year in a row, crazy weather damaged many of our most profitable crops. Each new bout of heavy rain caused sleepless nights and nightmarish days. We watched with dismay as our lush tomato plants turned sickly brown and three rounds of newly transplanted cucumbers had their necks ruthlessly snapped. We shrieked and shuddered as we sunk unsuspecting hands into gushy, putrid potatoes. We were forced to surrender our field of winter squash and melons to a plague of frogs and tadpoles residing in the standing water.

It's really easy to let stuff like this ruin your outlook when you're already exhausted from the continuous grind of growing, harvesting and selling vegetables. We took solace to a certain extent in sharing horror stories with other farmers going through similar trials. And we learned to be grateful that we were inexplicably spared the late blight curse afflicting so many in the Valley. It also helped that our sales figures somehow surpassed last year's and put us well on our way to meeting our goals for the season.

There comes a tipping point every summer when you stop trying to make everything perfect and start trying to do the best you can, given the situation. This year it came some time around the end of July, when it became clear that we couldn't stop the rain or the weeds. It was a liberating moment; we decided to take a weekend off to visit friends in Maine. Then in August we did it again, only this time we had the brilliant idea to leave our daughter Lily with my parents for the weekend, and we reveled in the pleasure of sleeping past 7 for the first time in 18 months.

But sleep will soon be in short supply again. As I write this I'm just days from my due date, when the birth of our son will change everything. By the time we get the first frost I imagine I'll be spend-



ing my days juggling a newborn and laptop on my nursing pillow.

I've been anticipating this transition for so many months, but it's impossible to know how it will play out. I still plan to field all our restaurant orders but I won't be the one packing and delivering the boxes. I think I'll be the one keeping track of our farmers' market sales, but I probably won't be at our booth to chat with the customers. I bet it will feel strange to be so hands-off – but I suspect that while my arms will be full of baby boy, my daughter will be claiming my lap.

I worry that the delicate balance of responsibility my husband and I had finally struck upon this year will teeter. How will we get along when he's stuck managing the farm without much help from me and I'm feeling overwhelmed at home? Will we both resent feeling like we're doing more than our fair share? I'm grateful that the season is starting to slow down before this new challenge presents itself.

We've gotten through the hardest part and we're still standing. We can see a time in the not-so-distant future when the relentless grind will slow to a halt. Now is the heady time, when it's possible to get excited all over again thinking about what worked and what didn't, and then imagining a more perfect farm season next year. How many new heirloom tomato varieties we might plant... what a difference a flail mower and rototiller would make for replanting weedy beds quickly... how many more CSA shares we think we could fill without taking on more land.

If it weren't for this creative rush that miraculously overtakes us each fall, we wouldn't be able to keep doing it. This is the time of year when the seasonal life we've chosen suddenly doesn't seem so bad.

Caroline Pam owns and operates The Kitchen Garden, a 7-acre specialty vegetable farm in Sunderland, with her husband Tim Wilcox. The farm's website is www.kitchengardenfarm.com. Their son, Oliver Rathbone Wilcox was born September 21, 2009.