Diary of a New Farmer

LOTS OF LEARNING

AFTER TWO SEASONS, MANY LESSONS EMERGE

By Betsy Allister

For the last two seasons, I have called a 15-acre farm home.

My partner Andrew and I share this home near Northfield with about 200 varieties of vegetables, herbs, and flowers; sheep, pigs, chickens, and bees; trees, barn cats, weeds, insects, and a red-tailed hawk. They are my teachers.

The lessons I learn are all over the place, from the big things like patience and gratitude to the nitty-gritty—how to plan crop rotations, create a budget, harden off seedlings, distinguish between powdery and downy mildew. But if I had to sum up what I’ve learned so far, it might be this: on a farm like ours, something is always going right and something is always going wrong.

Much of it is being young and inexperienced; some of it is just farming. There are days I fantasize about having all my eggs in one basket, so to speak; focusing exclusively on heritage pork, or dry beans, or skill-based classes, or potatoes. But I would miss the rest.

Animals cause more heartache, but you can’t talk back at a tomato, or give it a good scratch. I wouldn’t really argue with anyone who calls a chicken dumb, but sometimes one of our hens looks at me in a certain accusatory, don’t-forget-I’m-descended-from-a-dinosaur kind of way when I reach to take eggs from under her. There is so much expression in her gleaming eye that I wonder which of us has things figured out after all.

As enthusiastic cooks and eaters, it is hard to imagine foregoing even one vegetable crop, and there are always new varieties, colors, and flavors to try. And it all fits together: manure goes into the compost pile and then onto the vegetables, the vegetable scraps go to feed the animals. The bees pollinate our vegetables and the old apple tree, and we taste apple in the honey. The chickens follow the sheep and clean up their bugs. The pigs eat their way through our barley field, and in the meantime they re-plant the barley for a cover crop.

I know that realistically, I will probably put my eggs in more baskets, not fewer (recently, I have been looking longingly at cows). So I have to hope that the things going right outweigh the things going wrong: that the deer eat more clover than beans; that days of sun or soaking rains outnumber those of April snow or midsummer drought; that the potato bugs don’t get more than 30 percent of the foliage; that our Community Supported Agriculture newsletter has more cheerful anecdotes than complaints about the weather.
Betsy Allister calls a 15-acre farm near Northfield home.
I try to remember that on this farm, more life is brought into the world than taken from it. But that thought is little consolation when something does die. I still apologize to all the seedlings I thin out from our soil blocks. The neighbors’ dog got some of our chickens; we had two beautiful goats that got sick and had to be put down; sometimes a newborn chick doesn’t make it in the mail. It’s never easy—just this morning, doing chores, I found a dead gopher lying face-up and toothy right outside the sheep pasture. I’ve spent the last few weeks cursing this particular gopher, who has been tunneling enthusiastically all over the yard. I imagined him working late at night in his office, drawing a blueprint for a tunnel leading directly to our vegetable field. So it isn’t that I wanted him alive...but, still. A certain sadness. But then, there are limits. I admit my empathy has yet to extend to potato bugs.

A few years ago I worked at a biodynamic farm, where I learned to consider a farm as a living organism—its own combination of people, soil, livestock, crops, spirit. That concept resonated with me. There are hot and thirsty days of endless weeding, days when it rains at the wrong time and sets us back a week, days when I have to put a dead chicken into the compost. Those are the days when caretaking this farm organism feels overwhelming. But then the hens give us a basket of green and blue eggs, the peppers ripen after all, and the pig gets its appetite back. And the next morning I get up and drink my coffee outside, and the sheep are silhouetted by a fuzzy halo of sunshine, and it occurs to me that the farm takes care of itself, and of us, as much as we take care of it.

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