IN PRAISE OF THE HARVEST

Fall brings relief and a ‘plain sense of things’

BY BETSY ALLISTER

[Ed. Note: This is the second installment of Betsy Allister's diary of life on her 15-acre farm near Northfield.]

It’s harvest time, and with it comes relief. I heard of one farmer who always took a deep breath on August 1 because the hard work was over. Not the hard work of picking tomatoes or harvesting squash or preparing the soil for winter, but the hard work of thinking and planning.

In midsummer, the farm is at its most beautiful, but many of those big, lush plants—tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, sweet corn—haven’t ripened into fruit yet. The harvest remains uncertain, and while the War on Weeds is constant, otherwise our to-do list changes daily as we assess and re-assess and hope it all pays off. There are fall roots and brassicas to plant, new pests whose life cycles need to be learned, animals’ weight gain to monitor so we can choose the right butcher date, and tomatoes to trellis. The days seem to last forever in midsummer, and it’s easy to stay outside until the dark starts creeping in the edges of the field; on those days, we cook dinner late and go straight from the table to bed.

Harvest time is different. Plants die back and produce a bounty of colorful produce. It’s a time when countertops and CSA shares and farmers’ market stands brim over, but when my mind can be—if not empty—at least calmer. There is always planning to do: cover crops, garlic planting, end-of-year capital purchases. But there is also a sense that we have made it, that the crops will come in, that winter will arrive.

With clear minds come full bellies. Now that we are harvesting
potatoes, tomatoes, dry beans, peppers, squash, onions, and meat, it's easier than ever to make entire meals that grew right on the farm. My body hungered for heavy foods in fall just as it craves salad greens in spring. These sustaining, earthy foods appeal to my soul as well as my body this time of year. When all of us are moving inward, toward our own homes and thoughts, I relish the tight layers of onions; the hard skins and soft innards of squash; the hearty fall roots, tasting of this farm's soil.

It's harvest time for our meat as well: pigs, lambs, and a second batch of chickens. It is sad to let the animals go—they bring levity to the hard work of farming. The pigs muddy my legs during morning chores in their daily mission to root up my Crocs. The sheep contort their bodies around each other so that all five can munch the same boxelder sapling, despite dozens of identical saplings available for their culinary pleasure. Pathetic crowing attempts by proud young roosters have left me sitting down, dissolved in laughter, in a row of tomatoes. I will miss all that. But it is a relief that we have raised them well, that they have rooted and grazed and munched happily for months. And, undeniably, it is a relief to have one less responsibility. That is another pleasure of this time of year: in general, each new task completed means another weight off our shoulders. When we take meat birds to the butcher, another batch won't fill their place in the chicken tractor. When we clear out a planting of eggplant, we won't seed another vegetable there.

I remember, even as a kid, feeling attuned to the emotional contradictions of fall, a season of both excitement and melancholy. I loved the feel of the air but mourned the end of summer; I liked school but that didn't mean I wanted to go back; growing up in the woods, I was delighted by the blaze of colors, but depressed when the leaves fell. That complexity remains, but as a farmer, excitement wins out. Rather than a return to school after a summer of relaxation, I am moving in the opposite direction, toward a season of rest. While the leaves still fall on our farm, now I take all that color inside with me: gold-fleshed Butternuts, Purple Majesty potatoes, jewel-like Red Wing onions, candy-striped Chioggia beets, and hundreds of jars of stewed tomatoes. They brighten our cupboards and cellar even as the world outside turns gray and desolate.

Wallace Stevens wrote: “After the leaves have fallen, we return/To a plain sense of things. It is as if /We had come to an end of the imagination.” There is more than one way to take Stevens’ words, but I like to think that we are at the end of imagination because we can be. We have made it to the harvest. Soon there will be reason to imagine again, to sit inside on cold dark nights and read seed catalogues and dream about spring. But for now, I am happy to be right here: calm mind, good work, full belly, and a plain sense of things.