PLANNING, BUDGETING, REVIEWING...AND READING

Winter still brings work, but also offers a break from ‘arduous days and nights’

BY BETSY ALLISTER

[Ed. Note: Here’s another installment of Betsy Allister’s diary of life on her 15-acre farm near Northfield.]

The depth of winter. No coincidence that this season’s opposite is not the depth of summer, but the height of summer. In summer I feel tall with sunshine, disappearing into even taller rows of tomatoes and popcorn. These days, clouds sink down to meet the snow, and I feel small and slow.

It is a feeling I relish. Growing up in Minnesota has not made me love winter, but farming has. When we interned at AtoZ in Stockholm, Wisconsin, I told the farmers’ son Louie how much I missed my summer reading, too exhausted each night to get through more than a few pages. Louie looked at me as if I were crazy (as a teenager, he was skilled at that look). “Who reads in summer?” he said. “Winter is for reading!” Aha. That’s my kind of winter.

People ask me if I spend all winter reading seed catalogues...well, yes. Last winter I read Fedco Seeds cover to cover, giggling at the puns. Then there is the next step of actually ordering seeds. We have notes, spreadsheets, and formulas to determine how much of each variety of seed to order, and which seed company has the best deal on each particular variety.

Some people underestimate the business side of farming—I certainly did. We’ve worked hard to gain both the skill set and the mindset of small business owners. This is the time of year to review our budget, look at our cash flow for each enterprise, and revise our business plan. We do detailed crop planning and lay out a planting calendar that begins with the firing up of the greenhouse in March and continues through August. We recruit CSA members, attend farming conferences, and read about soil fertility or pasture rotation. This winter, we will finish our website, write a food safety plan, and apply for a government grant to put up a hoop house. It’s hard work, but easy on the body after months in the field—work you can do while sitting by a sunny window and drinking hot cocoa and watching chickadees spill sunflower seeds across the snow.

It all feels worth it when the first box of seeds arrives on a day in January. We rifle through the packets, reading them aloud, a benediction: Gypsy, Blacktail Mountain, Sumptuous, Ailsa Craig, Beaver Dam. Names to stave off the brutal cold. We rattle the tiny packets like maracas and marvel that they will feed so many people, that some of those seeds will grow taller than us in the summer’s height.

Winter isn’t all work. We move slowly and sleep well. We snowshoe across frozen fields and cook elaborate meals with the growing season’s bounty, squirreled away in the root cellar, cupboards, and freezers (everywhere, really—several bushels of squash sit by the foot of our bed). It’s a season for keeping the house tidy, for woodworking, sewing, calling old friends. And reading novels.

I kicked off this winter’s reading with a childhood favorite, The Wind in the Willows, which assured me: “No animal, according to the rules of animal-etiquette, is ever expected to do anything strenuous, or heroic, or even moderately active during the off-season of winter...All are resting from arduous days and nights, during which every muscle in them has been severely tested, and every energy kept at full stretch.” We farmers could do worse than to take our cues from moles and badgers. It is a time to burrow deep—under quilts, into books, and in the quiet of our own thoughts and plans.