



Notes From the Pea Patch

Foxtail Community Farm ~

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Farmer's Notebook

*I heard a bird sing
in the dark of December
A magical thing
and sweet to remember:
"We are nearer to Spring
than we were in September,"
I heard a bird sing
in the dark of December.
~ Oliver Herford*



Next Sunday is the Winter Solstice – the shortest day and longest night of the year here in the Northern Hemisphere, and the official beginning of winter. Cultures throughout time have marked this time of the season with a balance of reflection and festivity, creating warmth and light in a time of cold and darkness, and celebrating the return of the sun.

On a farm, caring for plants and animals, the influence of light - and of darkness - is easy to see. Plants need light to grow, and as the daylight hours have waned since the fall equinox, the growth of spinach and lettuce in the high tunnel essentially has stopped. Our laying hens too are highly sensitive to light, and egg production began to decline steadily in the fall, bolstered by brief daily supplemental light (interestingly, egg production among our young ducks has not declined significantly).

While this time of the year provides a respite from the high pitch of summer, there is still plenty to be done on the farm: feeding and watering animals, chopping wood, monitoring storage crops and greens in the high tunnel, and catching up on unfinished construction projects. And as the new year approaches we'll pause to enjoy the warm company of family and friends, to celebrate love and kindness, to ask for peace and to welcome the slow but steady return of longer days. Happy Holidays to all! ~ Eric & Rachel

This Month's Harvest

Our best guess for what will be in this month's share boxes – subject to change at harvest & packing time.

Acorn Squash – a hardy winter squash with a nutty flavor and dry texture. Store in a cool, dry area. Roasting is the best way to cook winter squash, with two basic options. *For mashed squash:* halve, seed, rub with olive oil and place cut-side down on an oiled baking sheet; *for cubes:* peel, halve, seed, cut into cubes, toss with olive oil, salt & pepper on a rimmed baking sheet. Roast at 400°F until tender.

Brussels Sprouts – snap the “little cabbage” buds off the stalk and refrigerate in a plastic bag. Trim stems and wash well in cold water. Excellent steamed, sauteed or roasted.

Cabbage – this will be a decision at packing time, selected from traditional red, green savoy and/or Napa varieties. Store tightly wrapped in fridge. Trim and discard the stem and core, rinse leaves well. Delicious in warm winter slaws, soups, stir-fries, or sauteed or braised as a side dish. Recipes for red cabbage typically include some type of acid to prevent the leaves from turning blue.

Carrots – a hardy storage variety. Refrigerate in plastic bag separated from apples & pears to prevent browning.

Celeriac – despite its gnarled appearance, this has a wonderful celery flavor. Refrigerate in a perforated bag. Trim the top and base, then peel away thick skin and hairy roots to uncover the fragrant white fleshy bulb. Excellent in soups and stews, roasted, braised or boiled and mashed in place of or in combination with potatoes.

Daikon Radish – Asian radishes distinguished by their white color, mild flavor and large size. Often pickled or shredded, these can be roasted or braised like other root vegetables. Refrigerate in plastic bag.

Fennel – this one is a maybe, depending on how it looks at packing time. Fennel can be eaten raw or cooked, which enhances its natural anise flavor. Refrigerate wrapped in plastic. To prepare, trim off upper stems and any tough outer layers of the bulb.

Garlic – hard and/or soft-neck varieties. These have been cured for storage, best kept in a dark, dry area.

Leeks – another packing-time decision. These large, sweet onion stalks are outstanding in soup, quiche and many other dishes. Rinse and swish leeks vigorously in cold water to get all the grit out of their layers. Remove the tough green tops, wash and dry the leeks, wrap in a paper towel, and store inside a plastic bag apart from any fruit.

Lettuce – leaf lettuce varieties fresh from the high tunnel. Refrigerate unwashed in plastic bag. Wash and dry completely before using.

Onions – red and white storage varieties. We are not sure why onion storage quality has not been great this year. To optimize storage life, store in a woven (not plastic) bag in dark, dry, cool area. I've also read that you can individually wrap each onion in foil and refrigerate. Avoid storing onions with potatoes, as the latter give off moisture that will hasten spoiling.

Pie Pumpkin – a sweet and tender variety of winter squash well suited for pies or other baking. Roast like other winter squash, mash or puree soft cooked flesh to use in your favorite bread, pie or other recipes.

Popcorn - remove kernels by rubbing two cobs together. For old-fashioned stovetop popcorn, put a single layer of kernels in the bottom of a pot with just enough oil to coat (coconut oil is the best!), cover and shake over medium-high heat until popping stops. Season with salt to taste.

Potatoes – potatoes grow very poorly on our farm, so we've partnered with The Farm at Miller's Crossing a certified organic CSA in Columbia County, for our winter potato shares. Store in a cool, dark, well-ventilated area apart from onions.

Rutabaga - rutabaga are bigger, denser, yellower and sweeter than their turnip cousins. Some shares may include the legendary “Gilfeather” variety described in our 9/21/14 newsletter. Refrigerate in a plastic bag in crisper drawer. To prepare, wash and trim the top and bottom, peel if desired. Use as you would other root vegetables – boiled, roasted, mashed, or in soups and stews.

Spinach - a mild tender green fresh from the winter high tunnel. Delicious raw, lightly steamed or sauteed. Store in plastic bag in fridge, wash well in cold water before using.

Winter Chicken Shares: a bird of a different feather



December chicken shares include your regular monthly broiler/roaster bird, plus two stew hens. These are not the same birds, and must be treated quite differently in the kitchen!

The broiler/roaster Freedom Rangers are true meat birds, chosen for their meat production qualities on pasture. While slower-growing and more naturally-proportioned than commercial breeds, they still grow relatively quickly, harvested at 9-12 weeks of age. They are meaty, tender and juicy – perfect for the grill, roasting pan, fryer or other “dry heat” cooking methods.

Stew hens are 18-24 month old laying hens that have completed their productive egg-laying period on the farm. Our hens have lived a good life getting lots of exercise, eating plenty of greens, grubs and insects and building up strong muscles and bones full of minerals, collagen and healthy fat. If you roasted or fried one of these birds, the meat would be dry and chewy. But slow-cooked in liquid, the tissues break down, yielding tender meat and the richest, most flavorful broth you can imagine. Your grandmother probably told you this broth has healing properties, and she was right.

Ready to stew your hen? All you need is a pot, water and time. Put the whole frozen bird into a big pot and cover it completely with water (it's ok if the legs bob). Add kosher salt, carrot, onion, herbs – whatever you like. Bring to a boil, cover, reduce and simmer on the lowest heat for a long time, at least 6 hours, overnight is great. When the meat is falling off the bones, remove the carcass, let cool, then pick off all the meat – you'll get ~1 ½ – 2 cups of shredded meat. It's fantastic in soup, stew, pot pie, enchiladas, ragus, etc. You can freeze the shredded meat if you like. What's left in the pot once you've strained any remaining bits is a rich, golden broth. Use it right away, or freeze for later. We like to boil it down to a very rich concentrated stock, which we freeze in ice cube trays and then pop into freezer bags.



Recipe of the Week: Chicken Stew with Dumplings

A winter staple in our house and a fine homage to these good old hens. If you look for recipes on-line, you'll find a spirited regional debate about how to make dumplings, but this is how I've always done them. This recipe makes ~4-5 servings and can be scaled up as needed.

- 4 cups chicken broth
- ~ 2 cups cooked, shredded stew hen meat
- pat of butter or splash of olive oil
- 2-3 cups of diced winter root vegetables: carrots, potatoes, celeriac, rutabaga
- 1 onion, chopped
- 1 cup frozen peas, thawed
- dried thyme, salt & pepper
- 1 cup flour, divided
- 1 tsp baking powder
- ¼ cup milk
- 2 tbs cooking oil

In a large stew pot, sauté onion, root vegetables and a pinch of thyme in butter or oil. When fragrant and onions are soft but not brown, add 3 cups of the broth, salt and pepper. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat, cover and simmer until veggies are tender. Add peas and cook 1-2 minutes more.

Whisk 1/3 cup flour into remaining cup of broth to form a smooth paste. Stir into vegetable mixture until blended, then stir in cooked chicken. Cook and stir on medium heat until thickened and just bubbly (avoid a full boil).

Meanwhile, make dumplings: mix together remaining 2/3 cup flour with baking powder and a pinch each of salt and dried thyme or parsley. Whisk together milk and 2 tbs oil, pour into dry mixture and mix with a fork to combine. Drop small mounds (~1 Tbs each) on top of the bubbling stew. Cover the stew pot, reduce heat to low and simmer for 10-12 minutes – resist the urge to lift the cover while dumplings are cooking! Dumplings are done when a toothpick comes out clean.

Another Recipe: Swedish Cabbage Soup Two Ways

This soup recipe adapted from Mollie Katzen's *The Enchanted Broccoli Forest* features cabbage as the main attraction. An easy preparation that you can pair with some dark bread and apple slices for a simple and wholesome winter meal.

- 4-5 tbs butter
- 2 cups chopped leek or onion
- 2 tsp whole or ground caraway seed
- 8 packed cups shredded green cabbage
- 6 cups vegetable or chicken stock
- salt & freshly ground black pepper
- optional: 2 potatoes or ~1 ½ cups rutabaga, ½ cup milk, ½ cup sour cream or plain yogurt

Version 1: In a large soup pot, cook leeks or onions slowly in butter for about 5 minutes. Add caraway and ~ 1 tsp salt, cover and let cook over low heat for about 10-15 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add cabbage, stock and pepper, cover, and simmer about 30-40 minutes. Season with additional salt & pepper to taste.

Version 2: For a creamy variation, boil potatoes or rutabaga, then mash or puree them with milk and sour cream or plain yogurt. Blend this mixture into the soup about 5 minutes before serving.



From the archives

Need more recipe ideas? Foxtail CSA newsletters back to 2010 are on our farm website.

www.foxtailcommunityfarm.com/MemberNewsletters.html

Here are a few favorites worth re-visiting:

October 6, 2011

~ Vichyssoise (Potato-Leek Soup)

October 13, 2011

~ Cranberry Pumpkin Bread Pudding

October 22, 2012

~ Apple Cider Braised Brussels Sprouts
~ Buttermilk Mashed Roots

October 29, 2012

~ Vegetarian Harvest Chili