

Sweet Earth Organic Farm

Newsletter August 2010

Given the pressures the weather presented in our first weeks, I felt the best I could do for explanations about your veggies as the "What's in the Box?" e mail.

It's about 4:30 on Thursday afternoon. We started our day at 5:30 this morning to take advantage of the only possible cool part of the day. The current temperature is 91degrees with the RealFeel temperature at 105 degrees. This weather is hard on livestock, people and plants. It seems like a good time to sit down and write a little. Granted this information would have served you best as you were getting these veggies in your shareboxes, but, as I've said, the weather has effected my best laid plans.

Topping the veggie "what is this?" list of unidentifiable plant parts that shareholders have asked about the most so far, are; garlic scapes, onion flowers and fennel leaves. The runners up include Red Russian Kale, Red Rubin basil, and mint.



Garlic Scapes

Although they won't be in the sharebox again until next season - let's start with an explanation of garlic scapes.

Scapes are a perishable plant part that must be picked within two weeks of budding. When garlic scapes are still in full curl, they are tender and delicious with a mellow garlic flavor. They can add crunchiness to salads, can be cooked in sauces and soups, stir fried, pickled when processed in vinegar, or made into pesto. Cooked - grilled or sauteed, they make a wonderful and unique presentation on a plate when left whole.

Garlic is the second most important member of the Allium family, ranking right behind onions. and its commonly divided into "hardneck" and "softneck" subspecies. The hardneck garlics evolved directly from the wild garlic and the softneck evolved later from the hardneck. Only hardneck garlic produces scapes.

In late spring, the scape is the beautiful tender coil of green that sprouts from the middle of the hardneck garlic plant. I believe it is a remnant attempt at another form of reproduction. It signals the end of the vegetative state and the beginning of the forming of the underground bulb and it's one of the finest treats of early summer.



Onion Blooms

Harvesting means catching that moment in time when the scape is in that first succulent stage. That harvest helps to direct the energy of the garlic plant to the bulb, increasing its size, and yields the delicious scape - all at the same time. The tender scape soon uncoils. It straightens, grows tall, becomes woody and is topped by a large flower capsule that encloses tiny garlic "seeds" called bubils. The bubils can be edible but the scape is now very different looking and definitely inedible.

The softneck garlics don't present this phenomenon. Their leaves remain pliant until dry and are often made into garlic braids.

Hardneck garlic was in last week's box.

Onion flowers...The bouquet of beautiful "balls" of tiny white flowers that you had as part of your first box was also a fleeting spring treat, not generally available to the public. Because we are seed savers, we let a long row of onions overwinter to be able to produce and gather seed. We cut some of the flowers and included them to introduce shareholders to the more exotic of possibilities of a CSA relationship. The tiny white flowers could be sprinkled onto salads or cooked into any dish to add onion flavor.

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Fennel leaves...The wispy leaves that you had in your early boxes have now grown to plants over seven feet tall and produced flower heads that we have included in your boxes this week. Use them creatively to flavor any dish with a mild licorice flavor. The variety of fennel we grew was grown only for its leaves last year but we had a deep, early, lasting snow cover that allowed overwintering of the fennel as well. The flower heads are going on to produce fennel seed which is a happy but unexpected dividend.



Fennel Flowers

Since this week's delivery was rescheduled because of the severe weather alert for this Friday the thirteenth, (hey, when I write it out like that, the weather and the date together are enough to make a person lay low) I'd like to somewhat touch on the impact the weather is having this season - with a few tangents thrown in.

For farmers, in any given year, the weather is always the biggest unpredictable piece in the season's outcome. The farmer can be an outstanding manager of all the available resources, make a terrific educated guess about upcoming weather patterns, and still, Mother Nature holds the wild card and trumps all plans. It's humbling.

I came home late Monday afternoon from Chicago with plans to try to plant as soon as I hit the ground - only to find the ground too wet - four and a half inches of rain had fallen over the weekend. And, it stormed again Tuesday night leaving another inch and a half for the ground and plant roots to somehow cope with.

For those of us who are organic farmers, this adverse "way, way, too wet" weather is a tough challenge. The continual wet weather of this season has really taken it's toll. Weeds are essentially the most problematic. Without a chance to cultivate, weeds are proliferating here at an astounding rate. If you've ever tried to get your lawn mowed between rains in wet weather, you can imagine what its like to try to cultivate crops on what is the only day the ground is finally dry enough - while severe storms bode on the horizon.

On the other hand, the corn and beans that you see stretching around the outskirts of Chicago and everywhere here in farm country look astoundingly free of weeds. Those fields are very likely part of the Roundup Ready program that depends heavily on herbicides. That system requires exclusive use of Monsanto's herbicide Roundup in tandem with the genetically modified crop developed to by Monsanto to resist Roundup. Hmmm. Today, 90% of the soybeans and 70% of our corn and cotton are Roundup Ready as well as other crops that are being developed that we know more intimately, including sweet corn. Over 250 million acres worldwide require Roundup.



Roundup Ready Crops

These GM crops go hand in hand with a system called no-till. No-till means the soil is not disturbed between the harvest of one crop and the planting of another. Crops are planted into the previous years field residue. Weeds and weed seed won't be turned under by plowing or cultivation so herbicide is very necessary component of that system. Corn that doesn't require cultivation can be planted in very narrow rows, meaning a higher yield per acre.

Monsanto sells the Roundup Ready crop seed and Roundup Ready herbicide as a package deal that guarantees the farmer more profit. Profit is a good thing - just not at the expense of the health of the planet and people. If your interested in the effects of herbicide you might go to sourcewatch.org.

So, we organic farmers routinely have more weeds and less profit and even more weeds and less profit in very, very, wet weather. Thanks for supporting your local weed puller!