

FARMER'S JOURNAL

FALL PLANTING ON
OUR FOUR-SEASON FARM

BY MARY BROWER



Our boy Peter calls them oranges, but really they are pumpkins. It's dusk and we are out in the field of winter squash. More of a smell than an actual change in temperature, a coolness has returned to the evening air that we perceived before it actually came, the way a rooster calls the dawn.

We turn the truck's headlights out onto the low horizon of orange globes and begin to harvest them in the gleam. After a short summer of abundant light, darkness has begun its return to the margins of the day. Before it widens into a permanent state, we welcome it as a beautiful novelty.

Our little one stays up late tonight for the harvesting party. With the steady lights of our house and barnyard off in the distance, it all feels a little like Christmas. Little Peter pops the squash from their dying vines, leaving the stems long just like we taught him, and sets them down gently in the crates. The sweetness of root vegetables and many other fall crops will develop only after being hit by a number of frosts, but winter squash is a member of the cucurbit family, the same class of summer vegetables that brings us zucchini and cucumbers, and it is sensitive to cold temperatures. There is a frost advisory tonight, and so tonight it needs to come in.

I'm sure everyone has a different way of marking the change in seasons, but the squash harvest is mine. While this smell of cool weather and the return of early sunsets speeds us along with a strong, perhaps all-too-human wish for more time, it also has a way of marking a shift between the climbing, ever-accelerating pace of high summer and the broad sense of completion that harvest season brings. Work may be far from slowing down, but with each coming harvest we can relax a little more into another day finished, another crop gathered in.

The rhythmic work of harvesting is great for thinking and also for telling stories. As is often the case, the advance of fall takes me back to the years Aaron and I spent together in Alaska, where autumn comes quickly to what is still considered to be late summer in most places. Along with shorter days and brisk nights, the dwarf vegetation of the tundra turns an almost unbelievable, rapid red. Daylight pulled back, northern lights and fantastic starscapes reveal themselves and become a whole new kind of scenery, as well as the signal of other changes. As in Northern Michigan, the more accessible parts of Alaska swell with visitors in summertime. With their departure, full roads and packed restaurants give way to the perhaps insular sensibility of a core community that has turned once more to itself. It is time to finish bringing in wood, get serious about winter and make time once again for family, neighbors and friends.

"And to switch out the wooden outhouse seat for the Styrofoam one," Aaron reminds me.

seeds of the season to come, each crop taking the place of the one that grew before it.

Obviously, people up north don't stop eating food when the weather turns cold and the nights get dark. But in Northern Michigan, much like Alaska, only a very small percentage of what we eat during the winter months has been grown anywhere near where we live. At our farm, we are committed to the idea that a region like ours can and should be able to feed itself straight through the year. That can make a project like ours feel a little different.

Along with harvest tasks like the digging of roots, fall on a four-season farm takes on many characteristics of a second springtime, and despite its sometimes-frenetic pace, it's also marked by the same sort of joy.

Once again, the preparation of new raised beds claims a portion of our days, and each time we clear ground with another harvest we sow crops like hardy greens, which will be ready in late fall or early spring. In the hoop house, tatsoi and mizuna take the place of tomatoes and peppers as the emissaries of new life. Even considering the relative warmth inside, the dearth of sunlight and the coming cold mean we will need to wait much longer between each harvest than we did during summertime. If we want to eat greens in March, we had better work extra hard during short, cool and already overfull today.

Fall is also an important time of year to look to the soil. Building organic matter and adjusting nutrient and mineral availability are nothing if not lengthy processes, the project of years if not decades. But if we weren't already dedicated to these practices, we would only need to look as far as the path of our farm's old fenceline to stop and take notice.

Driving back from the field with tonight's squash harvest, the bump of the old fenceline is so pronounced we have to brace ourselves when we know it's coming so we don't hit the truck ceiling as we drive over it. Settled by Czech immigrants back in the second half of the 19th century, our land was farmed hard for 60 years after it was cleared of the old ironwood, hemlock, beech and maple forest that once covered it. Some giant representatives of the old forest still exist on our place in the form of massive beams that support our barns. But in the old days, a fence ran from the barnyard to the newly cleared pasture hills. The ground underneath it was covered with grasses that grew where the plows and hooves and mower blades could not reach. Because the soil was protected by perennial roots, it resisted the wind erosion and overgrazing that decimated everything else around it.

Today, not less than 50 years after the old fence has rotted into oblivion, it is the ground you notice. Rising six inches above the rest of the land, growing grass that is greener and taller than everything else, it is an object lesson in the long-term effects of wind erosion on the soil. If we were to leave the ground bare after a harvest, what remains of our topsoil would be exposed to the ravages of wind for several months each year. This land can in no way afford to lose another couple inches of topsoil, let alone during our own lifetimes. So earlier

Photo by Mary Brouwer

While it might seem surprising that we would leave the timing of something as critical as the squash harvest until late evening on the day of a frost warning, we did so because harvesting is only one of a number of important, time-sensitive activities that need doing this time of year. Not just a place of harvest and closure, a four-season farm is always working ahead, preparing the ground and starting the

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today, Aaron made time between the harvesting and the sowing to seed a cover crop of rye and vetch in the garden of next year.

These plants are extremely hardy, and under the winter snows their roots will survive and even slowly grow until the big spring thaw. While their roots serve to protect the soil by preventing it from blowing away, they also benefit the land by increasing organic matter and building a bank of available soil nutrients for the crops that will be planted there in the future. Until we find an old mechanical grain drill at a price we can afford, we will continue to sow all our cover crops with a cyclone seeder, which is to say by hand. For now, our type of seeder is an over-the-shoulder device that its operator cranks while methodically pacing a field. While it does take some experience, with a firm seedbed and a good rain in the forecast, we can produce a perfectly decent, low-tech stand of vetch and rye. It just takes a steady rhythm, an even stride and patience.

When the snow recedes and buds are just beginning to break, the fields Aaron covered with rye today will look like green velvet carpet, and in time will become the gardens of 2014. But next summer and today are only pieces of a much longer story. First planted in buckwheat back in the summer of 2012 and followed by another crop of overwintering rye later that same year, this garden then saw a few orbits of our pastured chickens after the snow melted in the spring of 2013. Then in July, once the chickens had made a number of passes and contributed their phosphorous- and nitrogen-rich manure right where it needed to be, we planted the garden over again, this time in oats and peas.

Unlike most classes of plants, peas and other legumes have the ability to fix nitrogen in the soil. To get established, however, they do appreciate a little fertility, particularly in the form of something rich in nitrogen and phosphorous. Like chicken poop.

So here we are in the fall of the year, harvesting today's crop by the truck headlights, sowing tomorrow's crop by the light of day. As our mothers can tell you, there have been half a dozen addresses between that cabin in Fairbanks and our farm seven miles east of East Jordan. But more than 10 years ago in a winter so cold we nailed our blankets to the walls, we started to tend the idea of this place. In this way, Aaron and I are not so different from the Czech immigrants who cleared our land and built our house and barns a hundred years ago, a first generation of our own choosing, banking on the possible if not the guaranteed, taking the slow boat to get here. *eGT*

Mary and Aaron Brower own Bluestem Farm, one of Antrim County's newest diversified, artisanal farms. Sign up for recipe newsletters, get details on Bluestem Farm's four-season CSA program, and learn about concerts, dinners and other events at BluestemFarm.net.

SPATCHCOCKED CHICKEN WITH YOGURT-CARDAMOM DIPPING SAUCE

From Bluestem Farm

You'll need a good strong pair of scissors or poultry shears and a clear counter to spatchcock a chicken. The Oxford English Dictionary tells us the term originally comes from the phrase "dispatch the cock." Etymology aside, spatchcocked chicken cooks in far less time than a whole bird, and is surprisingly simple to do.

When you're planning to grill a pasture-raised chicken, taking the extra step of brining will make all the difference between a tough, dry bird and the most flavorful one you've ever tasted. I owe two critical aspects of this recipe to others: Chef Steven Grostick developed the formula for brine that does not ruin the meat when left in the fridge for an extended time, and chef Patrick Harrington gave me the idea of using an inverted iron skillet to diffuse the heat of the grill.

1 whole chicken, about 4 pounds

Brine

1½ quarts cool water, divided
3 tablespoons plus 1 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons maple syrup
7 peppercorns
1 bay leaf

Yogurt-Cardamom Dipping Sauce

1 teaspoon black peppercorns
½ teaspoon cardamom seeds
2 cups yogurt
½ teaspoon turmeric
1 inch fresh ginger root
salt, about ¾ teaspoon, or to taste
3 plump cloves garlic
1 hot pepper (such as jalapeno) seared, peeled, de-veined, seeded and minced

Grasp the chicken by the hole where its neck once was, breast-side down, and take a deep breath. Using your best pair of scissors or shears, snip through the flesh and bone along the right side of the backbone. Go all the way to the nub of the tail. Make the same cut on the other side of the backbone. You now have a backbone with a little flesh left on it—simmer this in a crockpot with an onion and some vegetables and herbs, and you have chicken stock.

Looking at the inside of the chicken's ribcage, score the breastbone vertically. Just a shallow slit through the bone will help you to flatten the bird better in the next step. Flip the bird over so that the breast side is up, and push down on it lightly, as if you are doing CPR. It will spread out like a butterfly. (Numerous instructional videos on this process exist on the internet.)

You're now ready to brine the chicken. In a glass or ceramic dish large enough to hold the chicken, add a half-cup of hot water



Photo by Mary Brauer

and stir in the salt, maple syrup, peppercorns and bay leaf. When the salt and sugar have dissolved, top it off with the rest of the cool water, add the chicken, and leave it in the fridge for at least 6 and up to 24 hours.

On grilling day or the day before, prepare the dipping sauce by toasting the peppercorns and cardamom seeds in a heavy skillet until they begin to smell wonderful, and then remove them to a mortar and pestle to grind. Combine the yogurt, ground spices, grated ginger, salt, garlic and hot pepper and mix well. Keep refrigerated until it is time to serve.

Preheat the grill to a medium-hot temperature. If your grill is set up for two levels of heat, either with two burners side by side or with a raised rack, use the method that allows the most indirect heat. A raised rack is ideal. Even better is a raised rack with an inverted cast-iron skillet placed on the rack below, with the chicken upstairs.

Clean the grill, baste it with oil, and then throw the chicken on, breast side down, for about 15 minutes. Turn the grill temperature down a little further (if you are using gas) and flip the chicken over to the ribs side and cook for about another half hour longer. You're looking for an internal temperature of 165° on a meat thermometer. Serve with dipping sauce.

FERMENTED GREEN TOMATO PICKLES WITH DILL AND GARLIC

From Bluestem Farm

These pickles are not made with vinegar but using the age-old process of fermentation. Throughout human history, fermenting vegetables has been one of the safest, surest and most flavorful means of preserving food. The process can be found across many civilizations.

In modern vinegar pickling, the acidity of commercial vinegar is what lowers the pH of vegetables so that harmful bacteria cannot cause the food to spoil. The sourness of the pickles in this recipe comes from the lactic acid produced as a metabolic byproduct of colonies of wild bacteria. Along with a pleasing sourness, natural fermentation produces a host of other benefits, including high levels of probiotics, enzymes, vitamins and minerals. Unlike every other type of vegetable preservation I know of, fermentation produces a food that is more nutritious preserved than it was in its raw state.

- 3½ cups cubed green tomatoes
- 3 cloves garlic
- 2 dill seed heads or 2 sprigs of dill
- ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 2 tablespoons fine sea salt (or only 1 if you are using whey)
- 4 tablespoons whey, optional
- 3 cups water, approximately
- 1 clean wide-mouthed quart jar with a lid

This recipe is less salty and more foolproof if you are able to use whey. To make whey, line a strainer with clean cheesecloth and drain a cup of whole plain yogurt over a bowl for a few hours. The yellowish, clear liquid that drains into the bowl is whey, and is full of probiotics, which will help your pickles engage with all the best sorts of bacteria. (The yogurt left in the strainer, by the way, is Greek yogurt.)

Chop the tomatoes into 1-inch cubes. Put salt, and whey if you are using it, straight into the quart jar, along with about a cup of water. Stir to dissolve the salt, and then pack the jar with the tomatoes, garlic, dill and pepper flakes, and add more water to cover. Make sure you leave up to 2 inches of headspace in the jar. If you fill the jar above its shoulders, you are likely to experience leaks since the friendly cultures of bacteria that are going to work on your pickles will be releasing carbon dioxide. If your jar does end up being over-full it may spill over as it ferments. Put a lid on the jar and set it on a saucer on the counter to work.

Over the next couple of days, you will see that the brine becomes bubbly and the vibrant color of the tomatoes begins to dull. To see when your pickles are done, taste a tomato after a day or two. If it's not sour enough to your taste, leave the jar out on the counter for a day or two longer. Once they've reached the peak of perfection, keep the pickles in the fridge—and know the flavor will only continue to gain depth over time. If you have access to a root cellar or cool basement (you want someplace reliably cooler than 60°) these pickles will store for months without electric refrigeration.

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