



## FARMER'S JOURNAL SPRINGTIME AT BLUESTEM FARM BY MARY BROWER

It's easy to see why, for many cultures, New Year's Day comes in spring. With the return of birdsong and days again awash in light, little piglets nuzzle their mothers and legions of plant seedlings reach for life. It is a thrilling time of year.

Still, it wouldn't be right to say that spring is only a time of beginnings. On a farm, seasons, weeks and days relate to one another like rounds of song, and just as one cycle begins, another is in the midst of becoming, while still another comes to its close.

Seen from this perspective, the luminous green of this spring's pepper plants represents less a beginning than the culmination of tasks of other years. If we could walk backward in time from those trim little seedlings, we would see in them the many melting tons of snow deposited by five or six months of impressive winter storms, and before that, a green haze of rye and vetch forming over the October fields.

Before sowing that round of cover crops, we spread compost and minerals to support their health and the tilth of the soil. And last summer, our chickens completed several passes of the same land, making their own contributions to the common weal and cleaning up what was left of a buckwheat cover crop we'd sown there the summer before.

If I say it takes years of seasons such as these to build the conditions of healthy soil and a healthy farm, regular readers of this magazine will know I'm singing another verse of the same song. Few



crops could do well spontaneously dropped into undeveloped soil; without care for the many necessary preparations that took place before today's plantings, our vegetables would be less likely to thrive, more likely to be overrun with pests or disease, and less dense in nutrients for the people who will eventually eat them. Now, with last fall's rye and vetch turned back into the ground, at last conditions are right to focus on the food this land will grow to feed our family along with many others in the coming year.



teenagers, jumping and playful and ready to go out on their own. We try to time the birth of piglets so their independent streak occurs in spring—it's better for everyone that the pasture be ready for them when they are ready for it. Hard as we work, we have to admit that as farmers, much of our job amounts to managing the timing of events to create the conditions that allow a healthy birth, a strong crop or a fruitful farm.

In the same way the success of little seedlings is not the result of a moment's planting, the birth of healthy animals is both a cause for celebration and, we must admit, an event we can't take credit for. Almost as long as we've had this farm, a small herd of heritage-breed sows and a boar have grown along with us, and their lifetimes of good nutrition, fresh air and well-being are the most important factors in the health of their offspring.

Around farrowing time, the human residents of Bluestem Farm all get a little anxious, but on the arrival of the happy day, often the best we can do for the new piglets and their mother is to shut ourselves out of the barn. Under most circumstances, human contact is no help at all. When the piglets are born, their condition often has more to do with the nearly four months of healthy gestation that took place before than whatever we could try do the day of the birth. If the sow needs us during delivery, something has already gone wrong. Fortunately, this is hardly ever the case. But farming is a tender enterprise, and loss on a farm, like loss everywhere, is disquieting and difficult. Behind the even tempers of many farmers are bouts of sleepless nights and worry, though you might never know it. This world of birth and death is anything but smooth.

Over the course of a few anxious hours, then, our sows deliver between six and 12 piglets, who, if all goes well, root around wildly for the mom's teat the moment they are born. Once the piglets are nursing, almost all our fears can be put to rest. From this point on, the sow just needs calm. We can offer her clean straw and water, but only whispering voices are allowed. Unfamiliar noises or smells can cause a ruckus resulting in panic and distress—or, worse, crushed piglets.

The sow on her own will care for the piglets with little support from us until, in a couple of months, they become marauding



farm, we strive to provide as close to a full diet as we can, for as much of the year as possible. But it has to be said that this time of year can be hard times for locavores. As a community-minded farm, we try to spread the wealth of summer and fall bounty by sharing bumper crops among our CSA members during the high season, along with our knowledge of fermenting and cooking, freezing and canning. With diminishing jars of tomatoes in the cellar pantry and bodies heavy from a winter of eating starchy roots, we still do pretty well thanks to the wonders of food preservation. Round about now, we love to hear back about how a jar of pesto, September green, has brightened up someone's spring pasta, or the transformative effect a few frozen cherry tomatoes can have on a winter root soup.

Still, I don't think anyone will blame us for going into the season of hard work ahead with a renewed craving for protein and greens. Thankfully, eggs are abundant this time of year, and we find that eggs are a perfect spring food. Since the laying cycles of chickens are light dependent, most hens are laying as well as they can in these lengthening days. Even better, the chickens' bodies convert vitamin D

directly from the sun as they walk through the pastures, eating as they go, passing into their eggs this as well as a host of other vitamins, antioxidants and good fats. For the freshness we crave, we hit the woods for ramps and rummage last fall's garden beds for sorrel, scallions and spinach.

Because spring—precious, yearned-for and half out the door—doesn't truly arrive in our part of the world until about May, farmers have no choice but to get up to speed in a hurry to make the most of the growing season while it is here. But what more could we ask? It is a beautiful time of year in a beautiful time of our lives,

Photos by Mary Bruner  
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and we're given long days to work for a future we want.

I'll probably always associate May with signing the papers on this farm two years ago, and with marrying Aaron that day in the rain six years before that. As a family, our time here in Northern Michigan has already included more than its share of joy. When we arrived, our oldest was just a year old. Now he's a sturdy lad who loves to join his father out in the barns and fields, who's moreover a devoted big brother to our infant daughter. Without a heated greenhouse to nurture our farm's young plant starts, we joke about how we've had to convert our boy's sunny bedroom into a nursery. A plant nursery, that is.



But perhaps the thing I love best in the work is that it's about finding solutions. Welding, sewing, swinging hammers, graphic design, keeping books—when our farm asks us to give everything we've got, what we're given in return is an opportunity, as relatively new stewards, to move a little closer toward understanding how this terrain can combine with a year's worth of work and weather to produce good food.

Harvesting one season's crop, planting another's, preparing for a third's—I can't think of a life we'd rather choose. *eGT*

*This essay is the last in a five-part series on local farming by Mary Brower. Mary and her husband, Aaron, own Bluestem Farm, a four-season community farm located in East Jordan. Learn more about their work at [BluestemFarm.net/GoodFood](http://BluestemFarm.net/GoodFood).*

**My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,**

**Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,**

**I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin, Hoping to cease not till death.**

—Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

By most people's standards, my husband and I are not young, but we think we know just what Whitman means when he says, "I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin..." With days lengthening out before us the way they do, taking on our second full growing season at Bluestem Farm makes us feel ambitious and youthful.

With the return of warmth, we're grateful to see more of the people who eat food from our farm. Our neighbors and members and customers and friends are the heroes of the local food scene, and their choice to value this type of food has a definite impact on our ability to produce it. These days, as we make frequent trips to the post office, picking up last-minute packages of seeds and deliveries of day-old chicks, we don't know how we would pay for it all if we were not also gratefully opening checks from new and returning CSA members. And although we've never used chemical fertilizers or pesticides on our food, this is the year our status as organic farmers will be official—now there's an envelope that feels good to drop in the mail.

I once heard it said that the good thing about farming is that there's always something to do; but on the other hand, the bad thing about farming is there's always something to do. And it's true. Farming is not just bending and tilling, it's also full of sketches, maps and the colors of the morning.

#### SUNGOLD TOMATO AND CARROT SOUP

Like all recipes, this one reflects a certain worldview. This time of year on our farm we are harvesting carrots that were planted last summer and sweetened by the snows of winter. As for the tomatoes, unless you had the foresight to preserve the cheerful orange and intense fruitiness of SunGold tomatoes last August, canned tomatoes will be good enough. But for next year, if you really want an antidote to what songwriter Guy Clark called winter's "culinary bummer," put some cherry tomatoes by this year. Just spread them out on a cookie sheet, freeze them, and store them in freezer bags, like so many marbles. Then they will be there for you in late spring when you really need them.

2 pounds carrots

2 medium onions

2 tablespoons olive oil

1 pint of frozen SunGold tomatoes, or 15 ounces of canned tomatoes

1 quart chicken or vegetable stock

1 tablespoon fresh dill

salt, to taste

plain Greek yogurt, for topping

Chop onions and carrots and sauté them in olive oil in a Dutch oven or other large pot. Add tomatoes and stock and simmer until the tomatoes begin to lose form. Purée to a chunky consistency, and add the dill. For a variation, ground coriander and cilantro instead of dill are also wonderful. Serve hot or chilled with a dollop of yogurt.



## PERFECT POACHED EGGS WITH WARM SALAD OF GREENS

After a long day when I'm too tired to cook, I often yearn for a good poached egg. The cooking time below produces a yolk of medium doneness—not thoroughly dry, not soft enough to leak through your toast.

### The Salad

- a handful of spring-dug ramps or, if you prefer, leeks
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- pinch of sugar
- ½ teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 1 tablespoon good vinegar (any kind you like)
- ½ pound young greens, rinsed

Chop the ramps and sauté in the oil. A dash of salt and a pinch of sugar will help them relax. When they're as soft as you want, add the mustard and vinegar to the pan and bring it all up to simmer. Put the greens in a ceramic or metal bowl, dump the hot vinaigrette over it, then toss with a fork before covering the bowl with the hot pan you've just removed from the stove. You want the greens to wilt, not cook.

### The Eggs

- 2 eggs
- 2 tablespoons white vinegar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 3 cups very hot water

Heat the water, salt and vinegar in a saucepan until just before it starts to simmer, and then keep the heat steady. **I know this is ineffable, but after all, we are in search of perfection. Because you're going to dunk the eggs in the water without the aid of a container, simmering—or even worse, boiling—water will result in the enemy of good poached eggs everywhere, a hairball of feathery whites.**

To further discourage the feathering of the whites, **crack the eggs one by one into a tea strainer over the sink before dumping them into the cooking water.** The thinnest of the albumen will run out through the strainer, leaving behind its more cohesive cohort. **With one hand on the tea strainer and one hand on a spoon, swirl the water in the cooking pot.** Dump the first egg in, allow the white to whiten and set a bit, followed by the other one.

Once the second egg is in, set a timer for 4 minutes and 30 seconds.

Drain each cooked egg through the original tea strainer, giving it a good shake before plating. (A damp piece of toast is second only to feathery egg whites in ruining a good poached egg.)

Serve the eggs with salt, plenty of freshly ground pepper, the warm salad and good hearty toast.

