

October 10, 2016

Here it is, mid-October, time for the annual end-of-the-season letter, yet the season feels far from over. There's still an abundance of food in the fields, which means there's still plenty of work to do. But even if the actual end is months away, it's time to reflect on 2016 and turn our focus to next year.

This season marked a return to the basics. When the Tin House was completed in 2014, Dan and I were excited to make the most of our new space. We launched an ambitious arts and education program, keeping the farm in a near-constant state of activity. By the end of 2015, however, it was apparent we'd stretched ourselves too thin. We were exhausted, and we'd let our focus drift from our primary passion—farming. So we decided to scale back, not eliminating arts and education entirely, but downsizing for sure. One year later, we're wrapping up a season fully immersed in the fields.

This renewed focus provided an opportunity to reevaluate our strengths and weaknesses as farmers. Vegetable production has always been our bread and butter, but we also have a colorful history of side projects—chickens, pigs, and perennials, to name a few. As exciting as these ventures were, the benefits did not always outweigh the cost. This year we finally took a hard look at what was worth it and what wasn't. We stopped raising meat birds, and I've asked a fellow beekeeper to take over my hives. Hardest of all, we've thrown up the white flag on the raspberries. It pains me to give up on a perennial that has been labored over and loved by so many people, but the weeds always had the upper hand. While the berries occasionally produced a moderate crop, they've always fallen short of their potential. As sad as I am to give up on them, I believe it's time to turn our attention to where it'll be more effective. In this case, we'll be replacing the raspberries with more strawberries—a crop we know we can grow!

Shedding various projects meant we had more time to devote to our foundation—the vegetables—and I believe the results showed. Our spring crops thrived because of a new commitment to row cover. We had lettuce all season, thanks to diligent irrigating. And when multiple plantings of fall carrots were washed away in multiple downpours, we kept reseeding. Now we've got carrots to feed the masses!

We also worked to offer CSA members more choice at pickup. We've always aimed to provide a diversity of vegetables, but not everyone likes everything. Years of dealing with members' unwanted turnips and kohlrabi got me thinking that there had to be a way to keep the diversity without pushing unwanted vegetables. So we grouped the less familiar items together and offered members a choice among those items. Making sure the choices were appealing and abundant was a challenge, but I hope it made for a better CSA experience, and I welcome your feedback.

This season was also notable in terms of reduced staff. I was blessed to be joined by Steve Cecchini and Elizabeth Rexer, peers with both experience and passion. We were a small team, to be sure, but what we lacked in quantity we make up for in quality. When I look back on the speed, skill, and efficiency with which tasks were accomplished, I'm nothing less than amazed. That said, we were always grateful to be joined by Donna Sinetar and Judy Stratton...we couldn't have picked all those cherry tomatoes without them!

Looking ahead to next year, we have various changes and improvements in mind. Replacing the raspberries with strawberries will be the biggest task. We'll also install drip irrigation in the herb beds, so that the basil stands a better chance against downy mildew. And we intend to plant multiple successions of the popular herbs—parsley, dill, basil, and cilantro—so that they're available all season long.

Next year will mark Restoration Farm's ten-year anniversary. In looking back over the past ten years, I'm proud to know that we weren't afraid to try new things, and that we didn't shrink from change. We've certainly evolved, but our commitment to the soil and the community has remained constant throughout. We're deeply grateful to the CSA members, staff, volunteers, and family that have stood by us through the years, and we look forward to another decade together.

Sincerely,
Caroline & Dan