

Saugeen River CSA

Newsletter

May 2013

Hello everyone,

“So, when is the first pick-up?”

This is probably the most common question I get this time of year. It can be quite a challenge deciding which day to start. If we start the harvests too soon, we end up having to harvest things too small sometimes to make a good share, and then it can take a while to catch up to the full size. If we wait too long, we sometimes miss whole crops that have gone to flower and become unfit for harvesting. Sometimes, especially in a cold spring like this one, the early crops seem to not grow very fast... then suddenly as summer solstice comes with the longest day of the year, things jump with growth and go from being way too small to being ready to harvest in a week's time!

So with these thoughts in my mind, I've decided that the first pick-up will be June 22 for Owen Sound members, and June 25 for Durham members.

As a reminder of how the CSA works and what to bring to the pick-up, please see the CSA Info page on the farm website. The highlights include bringing your own containers for picking up your produce, and the times and locations. For Owen Sound members, pick-up is from 7am to noon on Saturday mornings at the Owen Sound Farmer's Market behind City Hall. For Durham members, the pick-up this year is at Chicory Common in their parking lot from 3-6pm on Tuesdays. I look forward to seeing old and new faces!

The other question I get a lot is, “How has the spring been?”

In a certain way, the alternating sun and rain (or snow!) has been good. We have been able to stay on top of the planting schedule, although the first things got in late, and have not had to concern ourselves with irrigating. But the coolness is definitely slowing things down a bit. I suspect though that once the warmth comes, the crops will take off.

The biggest change on the farm is our soil and bed preparation for the garden. Since 1994, I have worked with creating the raised beds for planting with various tractors and implements. This involved either multiple passes with smaller equipment, or intensive deep cultivation with higher horsepower tractors. Over the years I had developed some very efficient tools to do this quickly in the spring. What I am discovering in the process of converting the farm to draft horse power, is that what I had been gaining in quicker spring bed preparation with the tractors, I was creating a more labour intensive season. The deep tillage necessary for creating the raised beds with the tractor made the planting area warm up faster, but also dry out faster, creating more dependence on irrigation. Also tilling deeper in the spring allowed more weed seeds to come to the surface, creating more weed pressure on the crops.

This year, we are trying to work with a shallower soil approach. This will conserve moisture and lessen the weed pressure. Horses are ideal for this doing this. So our crops are being grown in rows this year, 36" apart, instead of beds. This is also allowing most of the cultivation for weed control to be done with the horses. I've set up some tools that can be used even when the crop is very small, allowing us to get a head start on the weeds. Weeding has always been our biggest labour concern. Three of us full time are quite easily able to keep up with the planting and harvesting, but were not able to keep up with the weeding. So this new set up will allow the horses to help.

This is a whole new system for the farm. The horses and I are all learning how to do this. Over the winter I had figured out and set up the equipment, but now we are in the process of trying it out. The garlic that was planted last fall was the first to come up. I wanted to wait until it was big enough for the horses to be clear as to what was the row and what was the space between. They are not used to doing this, and as I was trying to guide them down the pathways, they



tended to walk too far apart, and the first couple of passes saw a few garlic plants under-hoof. Molly and Bert were not accustomed to walking as close together as I was asking them to do. I couldn't figure out how to make it clear to them until I had the idea to make a knot in the inside of their driving lines, which caused them to pull together tighter as I pulled on the lines. This worked beautifully, and they really seemed to get it, and they didn't step on any garlic after that!

But not all the crops were as big as the garlic, and this cultivator would bury small plants if I got too close to them. For this reason I had ordered in the fall what are called rolling shields. These roll next to the crop row and prevent soil from being thrown onto little plants. Theoretically, these can be used to cultivate crops as soon as they can be seen sprouting from the ground. So the next task was to try this out on the onions. This proved quite challenging as the onions were very small, and the horses were not clear where exactly they were supposed to walk. But I managed to steer them pretty well with only a couple onions squashed. What is amazing about this cultivator is that there are foot peddles that allow detailed steering in addition to steering the horses. The picture on the next page shows how the rolling shields work.

I found that as long as I could see the crop well, I could actually cultivate it. This is going to save us a tremendous amount of work. It has always been remarkable how other people I know who are farming with horses, are able to keep their vegetables relatively or completely weed-free.

What I am finding is that with the horses, I am able to get onto the soil sooner after a rain to do this cultivating, which leaves a loose crumb of soil on the surface creating a mulch effect preventing weeds from germinating. When I was strictly using tractors, I would not have dared to go on the soil when it is as wet as I can with horses. The damage I would do to soil compaction, would have defeated the good that cultivation does.



One thing I am still struggling with is that the horses don't seem to like doing this too much, and I think I know why. They are not used to being so tightly controlled. When the crop was as big as the garlic, they had a good idea of what was being asked of them, and it was not so hard to keep them in line. But with the smaller crops that they can't see too well, I am asking them to walk a straight line that I know, but they don't. This has meant that I have had to be right on them with every step they make. After a few rows, this seemed to piss them off.

I learned how to make what some horse farmers have called a "horse guidance system." This involves using cultivation shanks with wide sweeps in the bed preparation stage that marks the pathways. These make little trenches spaced 36" apart marking where the horses are meant to walk. This takes advantage of the fact that horses tend to follow a path, and it creates the path even before anything gets planted. I've just tried this out for our latest plantings, and it already makes things so much easier. Although I still have to pay attention to where the horses are going, they are naturally walking where I want them to, so it is not such a struggle to keep them in line.

It is quite exciting to be working these details out, and makes horse farming seem not only very possible, but also very advantageous.

We'll see you all very soon,

Cory