

Johnson's Backyard Garden  
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## The Journey Of The Farmer

### Why I decided to farm?

In this newsletter I decided to elaborate a little on how I came to be a farmer. I wrote this for new CSA members and those who saw the Chronicle blurb ([click here to read](#)).

While growing up in South East Alabama, farming was not an occupation that I even remember considering although a lot of the kids I went to school with came from farm families. Both of my grandparents families on my dad's side came from farm families. Dad majored in Animal and Dairy Science in college, however growing up he worked a desk job with the Farmers Home Administration, and there was no time for farming because every weekend in the summer our family spent about 75 miles south at Panama City Beach, Florida. My mom and dad both love the beach and my Dad is an avid sailor.

For the first 25 years of my life I lived in Alabama. The neighborhood I grew up in was located in a housing development carved out of the middle of a large farm. As a kid we would spend the summers playing in the farm's cow fields, pig pens, chicken houses or fishing in the ponds. We also had a lot of fun building tree houses in the woods. The only farm work I remember having to do was helping our friend, Billy Henderson, clean the chicken water troughs so he could hurry-up and come play with us.

Growing up I spent time on both my grandfathers and grandmother's farms. My grandfather on my dad's side, "Papa" owned a farm totaling nearly 1400 acres. The farm was on the Chattahoochee River, in Gordon, Alabama. The river forms the border between Georgia and Alabama, and Florida is only a few miles south. On this farm he had a herd of about 300 cattle, he raised pigs (7 sows and a Duroc Boar), and he also had about 240 acres in cultivation, (about 40 acres of peanuts and the rest mostly corn). He also had a boat landing and little store with a bait shop. I remember as a kid going down to the farm with my grandfather and fishing in the ponds. Once when we were fishing an alligator came up and took our whole string of bream.

My grandmother "Mama Nell" still owns land in New Hope, Alabama. She picked her name, Mama Nell, when we were kids because she did not want to be called "Granny". Mama Nell's father was a farmer and also served as the local postman and dentist. The farm originally when owned by her father was about 1500 acres, now the portion she owns is about 460 acres. I have been told that her father bought the property with income from carrying mail during the depression. Although most of this farm was previously used for growing row crops, for the past 10 or so years it has been converted to growing pine trees through government incentive programs.

Thus, while not being actively interested in, I was nonetheless exposed to farms and farming. After high school I went to college in Auburn, Alabama and graduated in Agricultural Engineering. When I was a junior in college I had an epiphany. I can blame it partially thermodynamics courses....but basically I



Brenton harvesting beets

started feeling very strongly that the human use of alternative energy other than food (such as gasoline, hydro power, electricity from any source) was responsible for most of our environmental problems as a society.

By using alternative sources of energy, I began to think that nature's natural checks and balances are disrupted. It seemed to me that by using excessive amounts of energy, humans are having a disproportionate impact compared to other living things. Imagine a logger 100 years ago when a logger would cut down trees with a saw or an ax. The only energy the logger was using was from the food he ate for breakfast and lunch. Now the same logger with a diesel powered motorized harvester could feasibly cut down several hundred trees in a day. This realization left me in sort of a dilemma as I was majoring in mechanical engineering. I went to talk to my department head and he suggested that I consider Agricultural Engineering. Agricultural Engineering proved to be a perfect fit for me.

With the new ideas I was forming in college, sustainable farming and providing healthy food for people seemed like the ideal job. I took a several horticultural classes and a commercial vegetable production class along with reading as much as I could about small scale farming. I began to investigate organic food production and the practicality of making a living as a farmer. In about 1994 or 1995 I first heard about CSA's. At this time there were relatively few CSA's in the country. When I graduated college in 1997....my college career was extended somewhat due to me not taking college too seriously and taking multiple semesters off in favor of

following the Grateful Dead around...I moved back home for a few month with my grandparents and began to look for a job. I was interested in internship position on an organic farm and my parents and grandparents were interested in me securing a stable job as an engineer.

To appease my family I applied for a number of natural resource related government engineering jobs, but what I really wanted to do was work on a farm...possibly animal powered. My parents thought that I was crazy! And I was unhappy because it was what I felt that I really wanted to do....but developing a realistic plan to be an organic vegetable farmer is not an easy thing to do.

Under a little pressure from my family....a few months after I graduated I accepted a temporary job as an engineer in Southern Oregon. After about 6 months in Oregon, I was offered a full time job in Casper, Wyoming coordinating the Water Conservation Program for the Bureau of Reclamation. I spent three fun years in Wyoming and then transferred to Austin when the Water Conservation Program Manager position became available here.

Next newsletter I plan to give a little history on how we started growing commercially in Austin and why we are called Johnson's Backyard Garden. I will also include some pictures.

#### CSA Definition

So what exactly is a CSA? CSA stands for "community supported agriculture". According to the USDA, a CSA is:

"Community Supported Agriculture consists of a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmland becomes, either legally or spiritually, the community's farm, with the growers and consumers providing mutual support and sharing the risks and benefits of food production. Typically, members or "share-holders" of the farm or garden pledge in advance to cover the anticipated costs of the farm operation and farmer's salary. In return, they receive shares in the farm's bounty throughout the growing season, as well as satisfaction gained from reconnecting to the land and participating directly in food production. Members also share in the risks of farming, including poor harvests due to unfavorable weather or pests. By direct sales to community members, who have provided the farmer with working capital in advance, growers receive better prices for their crops, gain some financial security, and are relieved of much of the burden of marketing."

If you would like to learn more about the food you eat and CSA try checking out Jane Goodalls book, *Harvest for Hope*. Jane covers a lot of ground in her book, all incredibly enlightening. Many people have no idea what goes into the production of the food we eat daily.

#### **Whats in my box this week?**

Salad Mix	Kale
Chard	Strawberries
Beets	Spring Onions
Carrots	Head Lettuce
Garlic	Sage

Some Boxes:	Dandelion Greens
Red Cabbage	New Potatoes
Broccoli	Sweet Peas
Fennel	Parsley

#### Veggie Notes:

##### Dandelion Greens

These are a spring green that have a bite to them. If you love dandelion greens: enjoy! If you're not sure: try to mix some of them torn up in a salad with a creamy dressing with the lettuce. Another way to enjoy them if you're not 100% a fan is to chop them and cook into a thick bean or pea soup. They love a rich dressing (butter/cheese) or to be cooked with a little bacon.

##### Cilantro

Works well in many cuisines, including 'American'! I like using up the green leaves and then tying up the stems in kitchen (cotton) string and adding that to a pot of beans or other soup for flavor. It truly helps. Cilantro pesto is also a great thing, recipe below.

##### Baby Carrots

Eat them fresh....they are sweet and our kids love them as a snack. And they also like to pull them up on the farm. If you plan to keep them in the refrigerator, cut off the green tops and store in a plastic bag or air tight container to maintain crispness. They can be used in cake, soup, sticks, salad, etc.

##### Chard

Enjoy anywhere you would a cooking green such as kale, collards, spinach.....

##### Strawberries

From our friends at Bickerim Farm: just eat them. You won't be sorry. :-)

#### **Enjoy meeting a member of our Farm Work share each week.**



Jesse relaxing at the pot luck.

Jesse Henderson Age: 35

I'm here because I have an interest in learning more about the farming process. My wife and I have talked for years about starting our own farm someday and I'm excited about the opportunity to get a feel for the various daily activities. It's too hard to nail down one veggie as a favorite. I love them all! My favorite dish is whatever is in season and lately it has been a winter root stew. Saute onions and any root veggies or winter squash (diced) in some butter. Add vegetable, chicken or beef broth, season with salt, bay leaf and any combo of dried herbs. Bring to a boil then simmer until veggies are soft. Serve with cornbread. Yummm!

## Recipes by Grit

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Okay, here is my recipe for Beet Bread.

Until the farm potluck on April 1st I felt all radical and cool having found one way of converting the steady flow of beets in our weekly veggie boxes into something sweet and palatable (I have to admit I have a hard time with those beets... ). Then I saw the other CSA member's innovative and exciting attempts tackling the beet in the box and was blown away by all the new possibilities... . Beet Chocolate Cake, Pinapple Beet Salad... . Speaking of which, it would be great if you would send me the recipes for the beet dishes we had at the potluck, so that I can make them public for all the members.

I am also looking for the recipe for the dry yeasty cherry cake we enjoyed at the potluck. That cake deal was just the tastiest thing ever (I even felt the slightly burned underside was adding to the overall yumminess :-)) and I already have the cherries waiting at home for it.. .

Thanks for coming out for the potluck! It was a wonderful event on a wonderful day.



Forno and chiongia beets

### **Chocolate Covered Beet Bread**

Ingredients:

5 eggs  
1/3 C honey  
2 to 3 beets, grated  
1/2 C raisins (preferably big, juicy raisins such as flame raisins)  
1/2 C pecans, chopped  
1/2 C chocolate chips

1 C flour (some white, some whole wheat)  
1/4 ts baking powder  
1/4 ts baking soda  
1 ts cloves, ground  
2 ts cinnamon powder

Preparation:

Mix eggs and honey together. Add the beets, raisins, pecans and chocolate chips to the wet mixture. Mix all the dry ingredients together, whisk and add to the wet mixture while stirring. Add more flour if necessary (the dough should have the consistency of thick gravy). Pour into a bread pan and bake at 350° for 50 to 60 minutes. Enjoy!

This bread freezes very well meaning it will still be juicy after thawing it. So, bake several loaves and save for less beet-plentyful times!



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### Not your Parents' coleslaw (adapted from Laurel's Kitchen)

1 head of cabbage, shredded  
salt to taste  
1 bunch cilantro, chopped  
3 green onions or a quarter-cup red onion, minced  
shredded carrots or other favorite raw vegetable for color  
1/4-1/2 cup sunflower seeds, pan-toasted

Dressing:

1 lime, juiced  
1/4 cup or more orange juice  
1-2 tsps honey  
1-2 tsps dijon mustard  
1/4 cup olive oil  
lots of black pepper

Sprinkle salt on the cabbage and bruise it lightly - rub handfuls of the leaves together between your palms to tenderize it a little. This makes a big difference in digestibility and it's the kind of thing grandmas know about good food that we've forgotten.

Toast the sunflower seed in an iron pan just until lightly browned and fragrant. Add the vegetables, seeds and dressing to the cabbage and adjust seasonings and salt to taste. The combination of the zippy sharp dressing and the toasted sunflower seeds is addictive.