



Falling with Style

On Monday night, after a full day of harvest, transplanting, I abandoned the ridge top fields when I could hear thunder through my hearing protection, which I figured meant that the storm was close enough that it was time to get inside, or at least to stop being the highest thing around. Everybody else being gone for Zane's last JV soccer game of the season, I stepped into the shower. When I stepped out a raging storm was in full progression. I actually didn't realize rain was falling until I saw that it was blowing horizontally across the living room windows. When I could actually see the minimalist greenhouse we built in 2005—a structure 125 feet long and 20 feet wide, so it has quite the sheet of plastic on it—the plastic covering was billowing over the hoops like a bedsheet being snapped over a bed. But on an entirely different scale.

Ever since a bad experience with greenhouses on a coastal ridge in Maine, we have had a proclivity towards bomb-proof greenhouses. We like to sleep well, even when the wind is blowing. But during our 2004 trip to Terra Madre in Italy, we saw a multitude of really cheap and simple greenhouses and field tunnels that really impressed us. We returned home determined to see just how far we could push our greenhouse design in the opposite direction of our former tendencies. For about 20% of the cost of one of our really awesome greenhouses, we bought an inexpensive, elongated frame, put it together, and threw some plastic over it. While most American field houses anchor the plastic firmly to purlins that run the length of the house, the Italian houses used ropes staked to the ground at each greenhouse bow (or hoop) and laced back and forth across the top of the house. Instead of rolling up the sides for ventilation, we relied on a combination of friction between the ropes and bows and forked sticks to hold the plastic up—every farm we visited in Italy had a collection of sticks that would make our boys weep with jealousy. And we stuck to a single sheet of plastic instead of the double air-inflated layer we normally use, so we didn't need to run electricity to the house, and saved on plastic costs to boot.

The stakes we used for anchors were dramatically insufficient, and the plastic blew off within weeks of our putting it on in November of 2005. We promptly renamed greenhouse, which had been named "Papillon," as the "Edmund Fitzgerald" in honor of the 30th anniversary of her sinking.

We found a new solution for anchors and reapplied the plastic that winter, saving the spinach crop for harvest in the spring. Next to give way over the course of the following twelve months were the endwalls, which we had constructed, again trying to keep the cost as low as possible, out of a single sheet of plastic. Greenhouse dealers will tell prospective customers that the plastic sheeting is "stronger than steel," but it's a darn thin piece of steel! We buttressed our design with large square bales of organic wheat straw, and planted this spring's crop of lettuce back in mid-March. By this time, a couple of our improved anchors had given way, the endwall plastic had ripped in places, and we were making plans to move the house as soon as lettuce harvest was finished.

Before Monday's storm ended, we had more than two inches of rain and had seen wind gusts of 100 kilometers per hour (which sounds even more impressive than 60 miles per hour), and the plastic had blown off of the Edmund. For the lettuce, it's probably better off outside of the greenhouse where it will stay cooler for the next three weeks until we finish harvesting the crop. For us, we figured out just how low we can go with greenhouse construction, and while we will always rely on our bomb-proof greenhouses for our mainstay production, we've learned some valuable lessons about how we can modify the design of an inexpensive house to provide modest season extension and modification for a wide number of crops at a more reasonable price. It may not be flying, but it is certainly falling with style!

Spring Green Share

Asparagus
Green Leaf Lettuce
Red Leaf Lettuce
Crisphead Lettuce
Purple Scallions
Garlic Greens
Baby Bok Choi
Carrots
Peppermint
French Breakfast
Radishes
Arugula

Important Notice

Please plan to pick up your CSA box on the same day it is delivered (Fridays for most readers). Our generous delivery site hosts do not have the space to store shares overnight, and many of them make a practice of distributing unpicked-up shares at closing. It's also worth noting that our site hosts are merely the messengers of the CSA box, and have absolutely nothing to do with the contents of the share. Please contact Rock Spring Farm directly with any concerns.

Weather: After the aforementioned storm, the week turned to perfect working weather that even a farmer couldn't find anything to complain about—brisk mornings, mild daytime temperatures, and bright blue skies with some occasional cloud cover. Beautiful!

Comings and Goings: On his way to deliveries on Friday, Chris took his Dad back to the Minneapolis airport for the flight home to Grand Junction. It's always a little bit of a hoot to pull into the airport with our refrigerated delivery truck.

Activities on the Farm: Kim and Zane rocked out at the Rochester Farmers Market on Saturday, with just about the only food in the market and the best-quality asparagus available. Our walk-in coolers enable us not only to store crops like carrots right through the winter, but they also allow us to harvest all week long, when the produce is at its peak—for a crop like asparagus, that means picking three times each week. With fast cooling and proper storage, produce harvested on Monday can actually be physiologically fresher than a crop harvested on Friday and held overnight without refrigeration. On Monday, under the threat of bad weather, we transplanted crops of radicchio, scallions, and lettuce. After the storm, we spent Tuesday trellising our greenhouse tomatoes and transplanting our greenhouse cucumbers, as well as moving on with the week's harvest, washing and packing.

Our Best Guess Estimate for next week's Spring Green Share includes an assortment of lettuces, asparagus, fresh baby beets, fennel, scallions, garlic greens, and more!

The Farm Kitchen

Lettuce season is in full swing in our greenhouses now. This week's selection includes a crispy **Greenleaf lettuce**, tender **Red Oak Lettuce**, and succulent immature **Crisphead Lettuce**. This last has long been a family flavor, with a texture similar to romaine but without the crunchiness, and a hearty, nutty flavor. These all taste great with a simple vinaigrette, and the green and crisphead lettuces will hold up quite nicely to a ranch or blue cheese dressing.

Asparagus continues to draw on last year's sunshine to produce its tender stalks. We have an unusual number of curvy stalks this week, due, we think, to the heavy winds on Monday—the entire field of spears leaned to the west for Wednesday's harvest. I threw together this pizza for dinner on Sunday to celebrate spring:

Asparagus Pizza

Pizza dough for one pizza, or 1 pound purchased dough or crusts

6 Asparagus spears, sliced in half lengthwise

3 stalks coarsely chopped garlic greens

Olive oil

1 teaspoon anchovy paste or some extra salt.

Coarse salt and fresh ground pepper

1 tablespoons minced fresh thyme, or 1 tablespoon dried

1 cups grated cheese, mozzarella, parmesan, sharp white cheddar or a combination of these

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

In a skillet, heat 2 tablespoons olive oil over medium heat. Add the garlic, anchovy paste and thyme and sauté until soft, about 5 minutes.

Brush raw dough or prebaked crust all over with olive oil mixture then place the halved asparagus on top in a radial pattern to facilitate cutting. Top with the cheese, keeping the parmesan on the bottom to avoid scorching. Season liberally with salt and pepper.

Transfer the pie to the preheated oven and bake about 8 minutes for a prebaked crust, or 10 to 15 minutes for fresh dough, until cheese is bubbly and lightly browned.

Peppermint was one of the first herbs we planted here, back in 1999, and we have been enjoying the following recipe for Chocolate Chip Mint Cookies ever since. Distinct from spearmint, peppermint pairs well with many sweet dishes. It also, of course, makes a great tea.

Chocolate Chip Mint Cookies

We enjoy growing peppermint, if only for the cookie recipe that follows. It has a growth habit somewhat like quack grass, spreading through underground rhizomes and taking over whatever it can. The leaves may be dirty, and should not be rinsed until you are ready to use them, to preserve the essential oils that provide the flavor.

3/4 cup butter

1/2 cup brown sugar

1/2 cup granulated sugar

1 egg

1 tsp vanilla extract

1 bunch fresh peppermint, chopped

1 1/2 cups white flour

1/4 cup unsweetened cocoa

1 tsp baking soda

1/4 tsp salt

1 cup chocolate chips

Preheat the oven to 350 and lightly grease a cookie sheet. Cream together butter and sugars with an electric mixer at high speed. Beat in the egg. Stir in vanilla and peppermint. Sift together the dry ingredients, and add this to the butter mixture along with the chocolate chips. Stir until well combined. Drop by rounded teaspoons onto a lightly greased cookie sheet. Bake 12 to 15 minutes at 350. Remove from the sheet immediately after baking, and cool on a rack.

Baby Bok Choi, featured again in this week's box, has a delicious, light mustard flavor, and much more tender leaves than its fully-mature version. Especially good in salads and stir-fries, it seems to be a mainstay of natural foods seasonal cooking.

We figure that if we're going to grow something as ordinary as scallions, we ought to at least have a little fun, so we grow **Purple Scallions**, which you use exactly as you would the standard white ones. You can differentiate these from **Garlic Greens** because the scallions have a round, closed leaf, while the garlic greens have a flat leaf. But use them both the same: anywhere you want a little bit of onion or garlic flavor without too much cooking. I slice them finely for everything from salad toppings to omelets.

Bok Choi over Rice

Some precooked rice

1 cup asparagus stems, 1 inch pieces

1 cup copped bok choy

3 tablespoons olive oil

2 carrots, sliced thin

salt

1 cup broth, chicken or vegetable

3scallions, chopped

Heat the oil. When hot, add the asparagus, bok choy, carrots and salt. Cook for 5 minutes. Add the broth and simmer for 5 more minutes. Toss in the scallions and serve over the rice.

Elongated, white-tipped **French Breakfast Radishes** have a distinctively mild flavor compared to their round red cousins. I have heard that in France they do indeed eat these as a sort of mid-morning snack with crusty bread, but I have also heard vigorous denials. I certainly ate my share harvesting them on Wednesday midmorning!

Peppery **Arugula** makes a great salad on its own with a lemon vinaigrette. Or add it to lettuce and bok choy for a little bit of mixing things up. One of my favorite things to do with arugula is to grill a steak, dress the arugula with a lemon vinaigrette, and put a whole pile of the arugula right on the hot steak as soon as it comes off the grill. The peppery arugula flavor goes into the steak, the meaty-juicy steak flavor gets into the arugula, and everything tastes really, really good.

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