



Little Red Dots

For two straight weeks, it seems like every little red dot on the weather radar has gone right over our farm. On the weather map, we can locate our farm pretty precisely, because we are within three miles of the corner of Winneshiek and Allamakee Counties in Iowa and Houston County in Minnesota. When we hear severe thunderstorm warnings on Minnesota Public Radio for all three counties, we know we've got trouble coming.

In the spring months, the internet weather radar—we tend to gravitate towards the Weather Underground site (www.wunderground.com) for its accessible radar and up-to-the-minute forecasts, not to mention the very cool “storm tracks” animation on the radar loop—becomes our constant companion, at least when we are near to a computer. Out here in the boonies, we can't get the National Weather Service radio forecasts, so the availability of weather data on the internet was a big deal. Back in the wet, wet summer of 1993, the crew of the farm I interned on would turn on the weather radio over breakfast, and when the static-y local forecast finally came around, every noise was silenced—you didn't even dare sip your coffee—so that we could get the best read on what the day would bring.

Now, my first move every morning is to open my laptop while I fire up the espresso maker so that I can check the forecast. The forecast for the days ahead dictate what we do today, as we try to make the most of clear weather for outdoor work and rainy days for working in the greenhouse and packing shed. A threat of rain tomorrow might mean pushing harvest a little earlier in the week, because picking in the rain is not fun at all, and I might leave the house a little early to get the tractor hooked up to make the most of the brief time we've got to get the work done. The hourly forecast helps us plan the pace of the day and the order of the tasks we have to accomplish. Hot weather means we'll push everybody onto early harvest after we roll up greenhouse sides for ventilation, and then everybody will crowd into the packing shed in the afternoon for a washing frenzy; a cool day means we might have part of the crew in the packing shed washing up as the crops come in.

For much of the spring, promised rains completely failed to materialize, and we found ourselves rushing to plant ahead of rains that never came. Finally, last Monday's slight chance of thunderstorms morphed into an elongated red dot on the radar that floated right over our farm and dropped nearly an inch of rain in just over an hour, with more falling overnight. Since then, we've anxiously watched the skies and the radar as little red dot after little red dot has dropped a little bit of rain almost every day since then. On Tuesday, just as things had dried out enough to prepare some beds for planting, I had just set out to seed some carrots when a ten percent chance of rain let loose in a fury—it didn't take much to get the soil surface too wet for the tractor-mounted seeders to work, and everything just gobbled right up. On Wednesday, as early morning harvest wrapped up and I prepared to leave for town for an engagement at Isabel's preschool, I noticed that the soil had dried just enough that I might be able to get those seeders to work, and since we are about two weeks behind on getting in a crop of carrots and some other things, I stopped by the office to check the radar, and saw one of those little red dots—just a pixel or two on the radar—heading right towards the county corners. I called Kim on the walkie-talkie and asked her to take my place, then ran out to the tractor and started to work. The seeders gobbled a little bit as thunder boomed around us, but I got most of the seeding in before a shockingly cold rain soaked everything right through in before I could even turn the tractor around to get out of the field. As it rained off and on for the rest of the day, I was grateful to have caught site of that little red dot on the radar.

Spring Green Share

Asparagus
Red Leaf Lettuce
Crisphead Lettuce
Carrots
Purple Scallions
Baby Fennel
Baby Spring Beets
with Greens
Cress Microgreens
French Breakfast
Radish
Lemon Balm
Spearmint
Baby Spinach

Weather: I doubt that our weather challenges for the past two weeks will get much sympathy up north, where it has been so very dry! We are looking forward to drying out this weekend so that we can get some major fieldwork done.

Comings and Goings: The contractor that built our house and packing shed last year returned on Tuesday to do some final grading around the farm. On Thursday, Pippa returned from New Mexico's St. John's University for another summer of hard work and good food; she'll be with us through the beginning of August before she heads off to St. John's Annapolis camp for her sophomore year.

Activities on the Farm: We built a little fence, mowed down a lot of the rye cover crop that we seeded last fall, tilled a whole lot of ground for our hot weather crops, potted up herbs in the greenhouse, picked asparagus, and started seeding our winter squash in the greenhouse.

The Next Box is scheduled for Friday June 15, when the summer CSA starts! We'll spend the next two weeks putting all of our frost-free crops in the ground, getting the weeds under control, and gearing up for a great summer!

The Farm Kitchen

Just a quick reminder here about the lettuces: the red leaf lettuce will do best with a light dressing, like a vinaigrette or Italian, while the bronze-colored Crisphead Lettuce's firmer leaves will hold up to something more robust like ranch or blue cheese.

Fennel, a consummate Italian vegetable, has a firm white bulb and green ferny foliage, both of which taste fantastic. Too often, even in Italy (or so we hear!), the greens are simply discarded, possibly because they are tender and more difficult to handle than the sturdy bulbs. Thin-sliced or shaved, fennel adds a delicious anise flavor to salads, and makes a nice appetizer served alongside of good Parmesan Cheese and salty olives.

This week's **Purple Scallions** are the last of our greenhouse crop, and although the outdoor crop is coming along nicely we are a couple of weeks from harvesting them. Use them like you would regular scallions, just have a little more fun while you do it!

Greens and Fennel Salad

1/4 cup olive oil
2 Tbsp lemon juice
1/2 tsp stoneground mustard
1 mini-onion, minced or scallion
Salt and pepper
Red or green leaf lettuce, torn into pieces
A few fresh beet greens sliced thin
1 fennel bulb, halved lengthwise and thinly sliced crosswise
1/2 cup crumbled feta cheese
Finely chopped fennel leaves
In a large bowl, mix 1/4 cup of the oil with the lemon juice, mustard, and onion. Season with salt and pepper, toss with the lettuce, greens and fennel slices. Top with feta cheese and fennel leaves and serve.

Baby Spinach has a delicate flavor and makes a great salad ingredient or standalone. Small-leaved **Cress** also makes a nice addition to any salad, with its peppery flavor and crisp textures; it also dresses up cheese and meat sandwiches quite nicely.

Asparagus season is approaching its end. After next week, we'll let the stalks turn into six- and eight-foot tall ferns to gather sunshine for 2008.

Asparagus with Sundried Tomatoes and Pine Nuts

1 bunch of asparagus
2-3 whole sun-dried tomatoes
2 tbsp pine nuts
1-2 tsp lemon juice
Salt
Olive oil
Put the dried tomatoes to soak in some warm water. Cut the asparagus stalks into one inch long pieces. Sauté the asparagus pieces, keeping the tips separate. After 3-4 minutes, add the asparagus tips, the dried tomatoes that you have cut into pieces and the pine nuts. Continue to sauté on medium heat until the asparagus are soft but not mushy. Add additional olive oil, and salt to taste.

Toss the lemon juice in right before serving.

Like most members of the mint family, **Lemon Balm** has square stems and fragrant leaves—rubbed between your fingers, it can't be mistaken for any other herb. Lemon Balm makes a decent mosquito repellent when rubbed on your skin, but it makes a better lemon substitute with some minty undertones.

Lemon Balm Herb Butter

Combine 5 tablespoons of chopped lemon balm with 1 stick of softened, unsalted butter (we recommend the butter by PastureLand, which is absolutely out of this world in flavor and color). Mix well. Refrigerate in an airtight container or freeze. To use, melt over vegetables, poultry, or fish, or spread on fresh bread. I like this added to rice.

I love beets, and often use this space to extol their virtues. But **Baby Spring Beets with Greens** are almost another vegetable entirely. With super mild leaves and oh-so-tender roots, these beauties just beg to be sautéed lightly with the above lemon balm butter and served roots and greens side by side.

French Breakfast Radishes continue to please with their mild flavor. I especially like to soak them in a bowl of ice water in the refrigerator for absolute maximum crispness, then serve with a saucer of good salt (we have been enjoying a gray Celtic sea salt lately) for dipping each bite. Served with Summit Extra Pale Ale, this can't be beat for a spring treat.

Spring Radish and Lemon Balm Salad

Try this as a nice refreshing start to a meal.
About 10 small to medium Spring radishes
1/4 cup chopped lemon balm
1/4 teaspoon salt
2 Tbs olive oil
ground black pepper
Trim radishes, halve lengthwise and slice thinly. Combine the chopped radishes with the rest of the ingredients and toss.

Spearmint has a milder flavor at this time of year, as do many young vegetables. We occasionally enjoy the leaves finely chopped in salads, or added to lemonade, but it really doesn't get any better than Kim's fantastic mojitos (as Harvest Hero Katie says, you've got to exsperience our spearmint!)

Kim's Fantastic Mojito

This serves two. We sometimes skip the rum and just use more club soda so we can share with the kids.
10 fresh mint sprigs
2T. sugar
1/4 cup fresh lime juice
3 oz light rum
Club soda
In a small pitcher crush the mint with a fork to coat the inside. Add the sugar and lime juice and stir thoroughly. Top with ice. Add rum and mix. Top off with club soda (or seltzer). Add a lime slice if you have one, and serve.

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