

## Sharp Tools

During my first real farmwork experience, at Fairview Gardens near Santa Barbara, I was surprised to notice how constantly the Mexican crew attended to sharpening their tools. Whether hoes or knives, they constantly dragged the edges across the grinder, files, and stones in the field. To them, the derogatory comment, “dull as a hoe,” would not have made sense. Working in the fields, they knew that a good, sharp edge not only makes all kinds of market farm work faster but easier and more pleasant, as well.

Several years later, as a Research Technician for the USDA’s carrot breeding program, we would sharpen our shovels before working to bury the edges of pollination cages—the 20 foot by 20 foot screen structures isolated different carrot breeding lines to prevent cross-pollination. We had about thirty of them, and all of the edges had to be buried in the ground (some quick math would indicate that we had 2400 feet of edge to bury). A well-sharpened shovel cut the dirt like butter (almost).

At Rock Spring Farm, we are constantly sharpening tools, especially our harvest knives. For almost every harvest task that involves cutting, we use a straight-edge, six-inch bladed knife with a full handle. When sharp, these knives will glide through salad greens, succulent herbs, and broccoli stems like nothing stood in the way; they will also slide right through your finger if you are not careful. I sharpen obsessively. At the beginning of the season, my harvest knife measures an inch from heel to edge; by October, I’ll only have a half inch left. Despite the safety features and guards designed into the sharpeners we carry in the field, one of our harvest heroes mishandled a sharpener first thing Monday morning, severing a tendon on his finger; Kim spent Monday morning with him in the Decorah emergency room. We’ve carried workman’s compensation insurance for as long as we’ve hired employees, and this will be the first time we’ve actually had a claim.

Last week, we sharpened almost every hoe on the farm so that we could head out to the onion fields to clean up some missed weeds that threatened to make seeds before we harvest the onions. I started with the grinder, then finished with a brand new file. I usually keep one sharp file hidden away (a trick I learned in a ski shop in Aspen) since most people misuse files and dull them rapidly. Files usually cut only in one direction—when pushing away from the handle—so you should push the file to cut away metal, then lift the file to return it to the starting position. A good file fits in your back pocket as you hoe or shovel, and when you reach the end of a row, you stop and give your hoe a few good licks.

On Tuesday, Zane and Ben worked until the end of the day to put new blades on our flail mower; I finished after the crew went home. Unlike a rotary mower, the flail mowers has 208 little blades on a rapidly spinning horizontal axle. This does a nice job of chopping up cover crops, and doesn’t make a windrow of material the way a rotary mower does, but we had broken so many blades on ours that the whole thing had gone wobbly, and we were actually vibrating bolts loose. With rain in the forecast and cover crops on the verge of ripening seeds, we desperately needed the mower to work right and to get things chopped down, so we proceed to remove 104 split pin cotters (the blades mount in pairs), knock out a pin, remove the blades, replace the blades, replace the pin, and reinstall the split pin cotters. Everybody who worked on the mower ended up with blisters.

I usually consider working with the lights on on the tractor to be a kind of sin, but I decided to go for it with storm clouds looming. Based on some work I had done earlier this summer, I expected to be out all night, but with sharp blades on the mower, I was able to mow three times faster than I could before (!), finished the job surrounded by fireflies and lightning, made it back to the house by eleven.

In any case, that crew in Santa Barbara had it right. Rather than making work more dangerous, sharpening tools actually makes it safer because the tool is less likely to slip and the operator is less likely to get fatigued—and the whole process saves time to boot, as long as you respect the tool and the process. It looks like our harvest hero with the hurt hand is going to be all right, too; we are hoping to have him back for some light computer work by Friday.

The heat that everybody on the radio made such a big deal about failed to materialize, and we didn’t really mind or notice.

Chris spent Monday in La Crosse at the big planning meeting for the Upper Midwest Organic Farming Conference. Since he coordinates the presentation for this, the largest organic farming conference in North America, he doesn’t have much choice about attending—and it usually happens on a day when the air conditioning is a nice treat. This will be Chris’ ninth year with the conference, and something always seems to go wrong on the day of the planning meeting. This year, it was an employee cutting a finger badly and having to go to the emergency room. Last year, our tractor driver decided he “didn’t get paid enough to drive straight,” and transplanted the Brussels sprouts crop so crookedly that all of the weed control had to be done by hand. Before that, a live-on-the-farm employee got so drunk the night before that he couldn’t see straight in the morning, and Kim made him clean the pig pen. Next year, maybe we’ll just take the day off.

We stayed busy with harvest this week, since the snap peas came in and those take a bit of work to keep on top of. We hoed more onions this week, handweeded two crops of carrots. A small crew transplanted fall cauliflower, cabbage, and broccoli, and planted a late potato crop. Lucas and Jessica added cubbies and shelves to the employee kitchen. Katie freaked out at a huge bug on Friday, which turned out to be a cricket. We haven’t told her about tomato hornworms yet. Zane and Ben whacked thistles all over the farm.

Next week’s box should have Swiss chard, Italian parsley, broccoli, cucumbers, scallions, thyme, and more.

### Summer Vegetable Share

Sugar Snap Peas  
Dutch Greenhouse  
Cucumber  
Dill  
Broccoli  
Purple Scallions  
Beets with Their Tops  
Spinruts  
Garlic Scapes  
Salad Mix  
Arugula  
**Salad Share**  
Salad Mix  
Upland Cress  
Garlic Scapes  
Purple Scallions  
Dill  
**Fruit Share**  
Blueberries from Little  
Buck Farm

### Proper Sharpening Technique Matters More than You Might Think

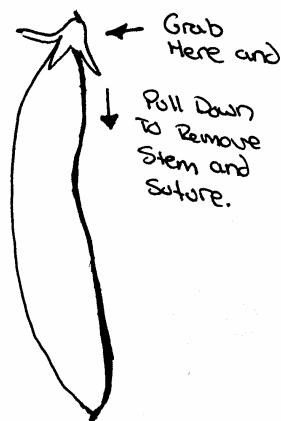
Proper sharpening technique matters more than you might think. A harvest hero recently sharpened four pairs of herb snips on both sides of each blade, rendering them useless. With snips and pruners, you want the flat edges to slide right next to each other. Putting an angle on the inside of the blade moves the two edges away from each other, and they won’t work any more.

Hoes and shovels should be sharpened only on one side as well. In any case, everything works best if you keep your sharpening tool at the same angle as the factory edge, then take a single lick on the other side to get rid of any burs. This whole bit can be a bit of a trick with some of the fancier garden hoes, requiring some juggling of handles to get at the right edge, but the result is well worthwhile. Skip the fancy diamond hones, and go for an 8-inch bastard mill file instead.

For harvest and kitchen knives both, I really like sharpening guides. In the field, we use an AccuSharpener to sharpen both straight and serrated blades. In the kitchen, we are fans of the Chef’s Choice Model 450 for its price and simplicity.

# In Kim's Kitchen

When the Sugar Snap Peas come in, we know summer has arrived. We work hard to harvest our snap peas at the right stage for maximum sweetness and flavor. The peas should have filled out the pod, and the walls of the pod should be thickened nicely. If you're not familiar with snap peas, you'll want to know that you eat the pod and the peas together, usually after light cooking. Like most vegetables, don't overcook them—crispy but warm is just right.



## Sesame Snap Peas

Snap peas

Sesame oil

Sesame seeds

Remove and discard the stem and suture from each pea pod. Steam the peas until crisp-tender. Toss the peas in a bowl with sesame oil and sesame seeds to taste. Serve at room temperature.

**Spinruts**, the white spring turnips that taste so good we won't call them turnips, return this week, and taste really great served raw or lightly cooked. They also complement the snap peas very nicely. The greens aren't very nice this week, but would still make a nice cooked side dish.

## Spring Stir-Fry

1 bunch spring turnips, including greens (slice the turnips)

1 onion, sliced

1/2 lb snap peas

1 lb lamb stew meat (or beef)

Brown stew meat with onions, and slow simmer with one cup water or broth for 45 minutes. In a separate pan, sauté turnips and peas in butter or olive oil for 5 minutes. Add turnip greens, saute until greens are wilted. Serve over rice or noodles, adding stew meat as the meal is served.

We have the first **Broccoli** of the season this week, and it tastes delicious. We have a hard time with broccoli throughout the summer due to the heat, and our spring crop sometimes fails outright, but things worked out right this time.

Curly **Garlic Scapes** can be used like scallions if you chop them finely, but I prefer them cooked. They have a nice garlic flavor with a hint of green.

## Garlic Scapes and Broccoli

Broccoli

Green garlic, or garlic scapes

red pepper flakes

Sesame oil

Chop the garlic as you would a green onion, and separate the broccoli florets from the stems. Peel (if

necessary) and slice the broccoli stems 1/4-inch thick, and saute until almost tender. Add broccoli florets and green garlic and cook until the florets turn bright green, about five minutes. Season with red pepper flakes or sesame oil.

Leafy, ferny **Dill** pairs nicely with the seedless, skinless **Dutch Greenhouse Cucumbers**. Did we mention that we grow those cucumbers in the soil? That's where they taste the best, and we figure we're not smart enough to know exactly what the plant needs, which is basically the approach of the hydroponics crowd. The way I see it, the plants know what they need far better than we do.

We also have the first **Salad Mix** of the summer this week, rinsed to be completely free of grit. We eat it right out of the bag, but suggest that you may want to rinse and dry it first. It's up to you. Unlike most commercial mixes, we go light on the mustard greens and heavier on the chicories, for a mix that is much more kid friendly. We packaged our **Arugula** separately. This green has a pleasant peppery tang, and works well with a vinaigrette on its own or mixed in with your salad.

## Fish with Arugula and Dill Vinaigrette

2 medium salmon filets (or any non crumbly fish)

3 tblsp pine nuts

2 tblsp freshly chopped dill

1 clove finely chopped garlic or some garlic scape

2 tblsp lemon juice

1 tsp salt

Black pepper

1/4 cup olive oil

4 oz arugula or salad mix

Mix the dill, garlic lemon juice, salt, pepper and olive oil and stir well.

Grill the fish and when it is cool enough, break it into smaller pieces. Add these to a bowl and pour the vinaigrette over, let it marinate for about 1 hour. Toast the pine nuts in a skillet.

Add the pine nuts and salad greens to the fish and lightly toss. I use my hands so not to bruise the greens.

Sweet **Beets with Their Greens** also come around again this week, with delicious results. Our June 15 newsletter has a recipe for baked beets, and the beet greens have been delicious. This following treatment is also nice and fast, and doesn't require turning on the oven in hot weather:

## Quick Beets

1 1/2 lbs Beets, julienned or grated

2 tablespoons olive oil

1/2 fresh squeezed lemon

salt and pepper to taste

1 tablespoon fresh chopped thyme

Heat a medium pan and add olive oil and beets. Cover for 5 minutes to lightly steam in own moisture. Uncover

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