

Jimmy Acres: A Tommerdahl Family Farm

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Hello Friends and Neighbors!

Wow, summer sure arrived with a bang this month--temps have been in the mid 90's and already not much rain in sight. Our plants have been hanging in there pretty well, thanks mostly to our heavy mulching. We'd still appreciate a good storm, though!

As usual, we had lots of projects going on around the farm this month:

- ♣ Both our Chapel Hill and Semora farm stands are officially open!
- ♣ Our summer plants (tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, beans, squash, zucchini, cucumbers, melons) made it into the ground this month,



with more to come as the summer progresses. We got a bit later start with things than we would have liked (mostly due to not trusting the weather to give us a late frost), but we're impressed with how things are growing so far.



- ♣ The first year of our perennial strawberry patch is in the books. Our plants did not produce for as long as we would have liked, but they sure did taste good! We anticipate improvements each year as we build our soil and our plants become more established. In the meantime, we're experimenting with intercropping tomatoes, okra, and squash in the berry patch to maximize space and to add some diversity to support the soil ecosystem.

- ♣ Our first batch of chicken has been processed and is now available each week at both farm stands. As with any project, we learned a lot and have things to tinker with and change next time. Now that our grass and soil has had time to respond to the impact of the chickens, we have a few trails of nice dark green grass running through our orchard. It's always great to see when theory and practice match up!

Interpreting Buzz Words

Anyone who has been to a grocery store knows that there's a plethora of buzz words in the food industry these days, but what do they all mean?! Organic, Free-Range, Grass-Fed, Cage-Free, Pasture-Raised, Non-GMO, All-Natural, Local, Spray-Free... how do you know what to choose and what type of system your food dollars are supporting? Unfortunately, that's not an easy answer. Most of those terms are not regulated, and even the ones that are (such as "Organic") can include a wide range of farming methods. This topic is way too big to fit in a box on a page, so we'll begin this month by explaining the two buzz words that we chose for feeding our chickens and why we made the decisions that we did.

"Organic" is a federally regulated term. In order for a farm to label their products "Organic," they must adhere to a strict set of guidelines regarding what types of pesticides/herbicides/fungicides/fertilizers can be used, they must be inspected, and they must pay an annual fee. We chose to feed one batch of our chickens all organic feed because when dealing with larger farms and feed companies that source from multiple farms, we can't talk to all the farmers involved to ask about their practices, so it lets us know that the feed we're giving our chickens is free of environmentally- and health- harmful toxins. However, it doesn't tell us anything about some of the other aspects of the farming practices such as tilling, monoculture crops, or soil health.

"Non-GMO" is a bit more of a controversial topic that, from our perspective, is a lot more complicated than either side of the issue will have you believe. GMO crops (or Genetically Modified Organisms) refers to crops that are, as the name implies, modified genetically in a lab. This is done by inserting a gene from an entirely different organism into the target crop (this does NOT include crossbreeding to produce hybrid plants). This technology may not in and of itself be dangerous, but it's how the technology is used in practice that we aim to avoid on our farm.

In today's agriculture system, GMOs are most commonly found in corn and soy that have been modified to not die when sprayed with glyphosate (the active ingredient of RoundUp). In practice, this means that large monoculture farms are able to non-selectively spray their fields with RoundUp to kill weeds without killing their crops. While this may make things easier for the farmer short term, it means that large amounts of glyphosate are sprayed directly on the food you eat, and large quantities run off into streams/rivers/oceans where it can kill non-target plants and bacteria. It also kills the beneficial microbes in the soil and it acts as a chelator, meaning it binds up nutrients in the soil and makes them unavailable to the crops that become your food, adding to the growing problem of nutrient-depletion in our food supply.

The topic of glyphosate and human health is another controversial topic. While it may be true that glyphosate has no effect on animal cells and thus does not *directly* affect human health, it does have an effect on the bacteria living inside of us. Science is constantly discovering new and exciting ways that the microbes in and on us have huge effects on our health, and by disrupting this balance by introducing glyphosate into our food system, human health is indirectly affected. There's a lot more to this topic, but we'll keep things simplified.

The topic of GMOs also includes the economical and social side of things—the seeds for these crops are patented and farmers are not allowed to save their seeds from year to year. GMO seeds are substantially more expensive than conventional seeds, and yields are generally *worse* than those from farms that practice no-till, soil-building practices, especially in years of drought. This means that farmers have a lot more on the line and less potential to overcome the upfront costs—including the high cost of glyphosate to spray on the fields—which makes the already difficult financial situation of most farmers even more risky, and farmers become increasingly reliant on federally-financed crop insurance and subsidies.

The Non-GMO label may tell us that the food we're giving our chickens is not directly sprayed with glyphosate, but that doesn't mean that the weed killer is necessarily completely absent from the farm raising the crop—it can still be applied before seeds are planted to kill off weeds, and pesticides may still be sprayed directly on crops to kill insects. By choosing this label for a batch of our chickens, we recognize these imperfections, but it allows us to produce a less expensive end product by using chicken feed that we know has relatively minimal glyphosate residue, and we are supporting farmers who are more likely to be working towards a more ecologically- and economically- friendly system.

Both of these buzz words have more to them than addressed here, but as always, we are happy to discuss these topics with you in person! In our last newsletter, we invited you to start thinking about how your food makes you feel. We are proud of our farming practices and we aim to not only provide you with a source of food that you can feel good about, but also to be totally transparent about our practices so that you can make informed choices that align with your personal goals and beliefs. We are always happy to talk about where our food comes from and the practices we use to get it to your table!

If you have any suggestions for things you'd like to see in future newsletters, or have any ideas for how we can improve our customer service or your produce-buying and -consuming experience, please let us know! And as always, please feel free to pass this along to all of your produce-loving friends and neighbors!

"Cheap food is an illusion. There is no such thing as cheap food. The real cost of food is paid somewhere, and if it isn't paid at the cash register, it's charged to the environment or the public purse in the form of subsidies, and it's charged to your health." ~Michael Pollan~

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