

A CORNUCOPIA OF CONTRASTS

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**Originally published in Rodale Institute's 'New Farm Magazine'
November 2003**

November is a time of sharp contrasts, the early dark of overcast days and the incandescent glow from windows, the chill bite of the wind and the enveloping warmth inside a kitchen filled with



good comforting smells, the sharp slanting sun through the leaden clouds, illuminating briefly the damp, fading fallen leaves, the dance of snow in the air one day followed by Spring-like softness the next, the sharp tang of cool house night air with the heavenly warmth of the down comforter, the bittersweet winding-down ochre of another growing season and the gearing-up brightness of the coming holidays.

The children know that each season brings its own unique pleasures. Last night, Elizabeth and her friend, Stephanie, ran outside after supper to play flashlight tag in the dark. We could hear lots of unseen whooping and laughing for a few minutes before they came dashing back in, cheeks pink, eyes glowing, fairly bursting with joy at the contrasts of cold and warm, light and dark. Children know innately that there are joys of each season and that it is the celebration of those joys that makes the unpleasantness bearable.

While some people react to the shortening days of November with melancholy, I have always enjoyed the November contrasts, the sense of turning the camera and feeling the world swing into a sharp, new and interesting focus, full of fresh sensations fragrant with happy memories. I enjoy savoring the renewed appreciation for wool sweaters, thick gloves, steaming mugs, spicy beef stew, fresh hot bread, glass storm doors, and icy windshields that had grown so tiresome at the end of last winter. I enjoy November's refreshing change in the air, solidly grounded in the memories of the past.

To be sure, this change in the air brings its share of less savory sensations. The pigs' water hose was frozen this morning and it was not fun hauling 5 gallon pails of icy water sloshing down my pant legs. It is not fun for Klaas to have to fix the corn dryer in the bitter cold early dark, his cold hands aching while using the tools. But that's all part of the balance too.

WEIGHING THE BALANCE

As this November comes, we reach the end of the 2003 harvest. The soybeans are all in, snatched out of the field before the first snow through sheer determination, long hours and good luck that the combine didn't break. Klaas and Robert, our farm manager, worked long into the night for most of one weekend, so determined they were to beat the next predicted rain - and they did! The soybean crop yielded respectably, considering how adverse the season was, and they are attractive big Vintons. With the organic soybean price shooting up dramatically over the past month, this will be a successful crop.

The corn is now about half done and it too is yielding better than we had expected. Unfortunately the moisture is high but we can't wait any longer to harvest - the propane company is making plenty off our grain dryer! Once dry however, the corn is filling the bins with good quality grain, bright, clean and heavy.

During the summer, the small grains, without exception, were woefully disappointing, with depressed yields, poor quality and difficult harvesting conditions. Little of the wheat or spelt in New York made baking quality, farmers just couldn't get into the sodden fields to harvest before the grain sprouted. The snapbeans never grew much in the soggy soil, few plants were over a foot high and consequently the yield was low. The income from the snapbeans just barely covered the seed costs. But the sweet corn did much better than expected with a decent yield, little insect pressure and good quality. The red kidney bean yield was down and it was really difficult to harvest them without damage because they wouldn't dry down, but once they were gently dried after harvest, they do look remarkably nice.

Next week will be devoted to harvesting the cabbage. This has really been our 'pins-and-needles' crop, because up until a few days ago, we didn't have a market for the approximately 200 tons of beautiful organic cabbage that we have put so much effort into this year. It seems that cabbage really likes a nasty wet cold summer, and throughout our area, cabbage grew prodigiously, producing a massive glut on the market. For weeks it has been heartbreaking to drive past the cabbage, thinking we would probably have to just plow it under. But, a few days ago, a good market came through, if we can get it harvested right away! We may actually not have enough to supply all that this market wants. Now the 5 of us, and anyone else we can coerce, must cut and load the heads as fast as we can and get them on their way. It will be cold, our hands will ache from the cold, our boots will cake with half-frozen slimy mud, our shoulders and backs will burn from the unaccustomed exercise, and we may even have to occasionally remind the kids and ourselves that this is



Quality Family Time, but in the long run, we will remember this year's cabbage harvest as we remember last year's - as a really good time.

The contrasts of an erratic season, the simultaneous up and down, glut and crop failure, successes and disappointments, fun and frustrations, the good decisions and the bad, and all the many shades of gray in between.

The 2004 crop has also begun. Often within hours after harvesting the red kidneys and soybeans, the fields were disked and planted back to small grains - wheat, barley, spelt, and rye. We hate to see fields uncovered for the winter, but the incessant rains into the fall has meant that much of these grains got in after they optimally should have been planted. Can't do much about that, we're doing the best we can, considering the circumstances. These small grains will be underseeded with red clover in late winter to provide nitrogen and organic matter - a critical point of the continuous cycling of the crop rotation.

TAKING STOCK

November is also for taking stock of the year. Typically, when the combine makes its last pass, most farmers just want to get out of the field, put the machinery away, and take a break.

This year, we're trying to discipline ourselves to use this time to make close observations and try to draw some educated conclusions. Klaas has said many times that he learns more from his failures than from his successes. When you are successful, it is often hard to tell whether it was because of something you did, or sheer dumb luck. But when things don't go well, there is a valuable opportunity to figure out why.

In the recent high winds, many fields of corn around here tipped sideways or even went down, but there are also fields that are still standing strongly. Is there a reason for this difference? We're trying to make correlations between soil tests, crop histories, varieties, and insect damage and the degree of lodging. We also are working with Cornell corn breeders to understand what their field trial on our farm of breeding selections has shown.

We were surprised, both positively and negatively, by the fluctuating soybean yields in different spots and are now trying to determine why these fluctuations occurred. Is more tile drainage needed (this shows up most clearly in a wet year like this one!)? Do different points in the crop rotation seem to make a difference? Are there other things that we're not seeing or adequately thinking about?

Klaas has spent a lot of time this fall, poking around the Internet, trying to find information on small grain production in Europe. It is convenient that Klaas' first language from childhood is German, his parents were German refugees from World War II. He is finding that Europeans routinely achieve double or more the yields of wheat, barley and oats than we in the United States do, and he is trying to figure out why. Certainly cold wet seasons, like ours this year, are not uncommon in Northern Europe.

Based on what we're reading, organic barley yields of 150-200 bu/acre and organic wheat yields of 100-150 bu/acre should be possible, if we can learn to manage our small grains as intensively as we've learned to manage corn and soybeans. In order to increase our small grain yields and quality, we need to learn more about the optimal seeding rate, tillering, seed placement, equipment adjustments, soil fertility balance, and we need to develop a more accurate means to evaluate field conditions, equipment, and the potential of growing plants.



We are working on a fairly ambitious small grain project with the consultants at Agricultural Consulting Services in Rochester, NY to determine the factors that enhance and suppress small grain yields in New York. This fall, this has included counting seedling emergence and the number tillers to try to evaluate the effect of seeding rate and various compost-based starter fertilizers on mid-fall growth and tillering. Already we're seeing distinct differences due to soil

fertility and wheel track compaction. We are also cooperating with the Cornell University small grain breeders on a variety trial of leading wheat selections to evaluate how they perform under organic conditions.

Now also we must complete our 2003 crop record keeping, making sure all the weigh slips and Bills of Lading are corralled into each crop's folder for next year's organic inspection, that all our buyers have gotten a copy of our new organic certificate, and that we have adequately recorded all the harvest, storage and sales information to date so we can accurately calculate and evaluate our costs of production. Wrapping up the loose ends, that's part of maintaining the balance too.

A FULL CORNUCOPIA

November brings Thanksgiving, an American holiday in transition. What does Thanksgiving mean to most people these days, in a society where less than 2% of Americans are farmers, where families are widely scattered and over-busy, where grocery stores overflow with excess food year-round, and where faith is lost in the whirl of modern life? Few people still appreciate the real meaning of a harvest festival, the relief and gratitude for securing enough food for the winter, the bins full of corn, shelves full of canned tomatoes and peaches, and freezers full of vegetables and meat, the urgency of "all is safely gathered in, 'ere the winter storms begin", and a house tight and warm against the cold wind.

For us, Thanksgiving week also brings a cornucopia of birthdays, our boys turn 15 and 8, and my parents turn 77 and 88. Ah, the contrasts of age! The delights and frustrations of childhood, the abilities and attitudes of high school, the wisdom and infirmities of age, and us, in our middle years, as temporarily the fulcrum on which this family balances, knowing that too will change with time. For right now, it is a celebration of wonderful lives at their beginning and wonderful lives nearing the end, and everything in between!

It is our hope that for you that this year, Thanksgiving is more than merely a celebration of gluttony and football! We hope that Thanksgiving is a celebration of the inevitable contrasts of life, of the successes and the failures, and most importantly, a celebration of contentment and thankfulness for the overall balance .