

## DEFENSIVE FARMING

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It rained again last night. I lay awake listening to the rain beating down in sheets against the windows, the rumble of approaching thunder, watching the lightning flash through the curtains, listening to Klaas' calm, steady breathing.

Let him sleep, that blessed sweet oblivion, a brief and welcome peace from the worry about the crops. There will be plenty of time tomorrow to look at the hunkered-down snapbeans, their roots rotting in the sodden ground, to worry about the sprouted wheat, the molding hay, the beautiful, heavy oats lying flat on the ground. About not being able to cultivate in mud. About



another year of difficult weather and stressed-out crops. About the hoped-for big harvest that will not happen.

For most of us in New York, this is the fourth year in a row of disastrous weather. For many farmers, this is the make-it-or-break-it year, the year we HAD to get a good crop. Some luck was due, after all! But it isn't happening that way. We understand that many of our neighbors in Pennsylvania and Ohio are seeing worse weather and that throughout the country, extremes in weather are common and farmers all over are suffering.

This year in New York, the season started out cold and wet. That was frustrating, but when the weather broke in June, everyone heaved a huge sigh of relief and kicked into overdrive, plowing, planting and cultivating with a vengeance, now hoping for a long hot summer and late warm fall. Well, its August now, with barely 2 dry days in the past 30. The temperature hovers around 75 during the day, not exactly prime summer weather. And the crops are showing the stress.

One older farmer, John, came into the mill today with a bag of wheat he's just harvested. John held out a handful of hairy damp things, the sprouts nearly an inch long. He laughed bitterly and said with a sad smile, "Them aren't sprouts, them are roots. I might as well just disk up the field and plant these as my wheat for next year." He and I both knew that it doesn't work that way, that his crop was ruined and there was nothing either of us could do about it.

So, what do we do in years like this? How do we farm defensively to survive through tough years?

Once there was a farmer who was trying to plant soybeans - he carefully prepared the fields and planted, only for a cloud burst to come along and wash the seed all away. Once the field dried out, again he disked and planted, only for again for the rain to come and away went the seed. Finally, a third time, the farmer got on the tractor, tilled the field, and dutifully took the corn planter back and forth over the field. Just as he was finishing the last row, the clouds opened up. Standing in the field in the rain, looking up at the sky, the farmer started laughing and shook his fist at the sky saying, "Got you there, fooled you! I didn't put seed in the planter THIS time!"

That could be many farmers we've talked to this year. Its mighty easy to get a little crazy or a little discouraged.

### **STEP BACK AND TAKE A DEEP BREATH**

We'll get to the agronomics in a minute, but really the most important thing to look at it all with a little more perspective and find something happy to think about. Realize that the weather may be stressing the plants but it doesn't have to stress you, you alone can control that. As Klaas said yesterday, "I am responsible for the successes, I am responsible for the failures, and that's a lot of responsibility, but I am also responsible for my reaction to it all - how I choose I respond." Certainly that is easier said than done, but it is healthy to recognize how true it is.

Sometimes you will do everything humanly possible to grow a crop, you will work long hours, have the machinery set perfectly, plant good seed and cultivate on time, and still the crops will fail. Sometimes sheer determination and even great skill will not be good enough. You need though to accept that it was the plants that failed, NOT that you, intrinsically, are the failure.

Farmers are notorious defining themselves by the quality of their crops, especially when seen through another farmer's eyes. Their self-esteem is wrapped tightly to a vigorous field of soybeans, a bin full of corn, the number of weeds in the row. It is pretty hard on the self-esteem to have been last year's "neighborhood wonder" and now this year have your crops look no better than everyone else's, maybe even worse!

But soybeans are just soybeans, they aren't human. We must somehow separate ourselves from that if we are going to survive the difficult years without getting really depressed. If you have done everything you could and done it as well as you can, then the stressed crops are NOT your fault and you are NOT alone. There are many many of us who have felt the same feelings - and lived to tell about it!

### **IF YOU COMPARE YOURSELF WITH OTHERS . . .**

Several months ago, at odd times through the day, fragments of philosophy started running through my head half remembered. Slowly I pulled together enough pieces to recall they were from a rather hokey popular 'song' from the 70's called 'Desiderata'. Searching the internet, I found a copy and was impressed by the pertinence of some of its wisdom, especially now that I have a few more years behind me to apply it to.

One line in the poem says :” If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain or bitter, for there will always be greater and lesser persons than yourself. Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your own career, however humble, it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time. ” Generally I have been struck by the good sense in Desiderata, but this line is wrong. There are not greater or lesser PERSONS. There may be people who appear to have achieved greater or lesser levels of success at the moment. But moments change, as do relative achievement levels.

In times of stress, it is tempting to look for people in worse condition and think “I’m not doing so badly if Fred is doing worse, Ron’s weeds really got away from him, Dave’s corn hasn’t even started tasseling yet, and did you hear how badly John’s wheat sprouted?” There is definitely a seductive lure to this approach, undeniably it does make you feel better for awhile. But it is neither a healthy nor productive response, it certainly doesn’t make our crops grow any better and it doesn’t make friends who will support us when we have tough times.

It is also not productive to feel bummed out over the neighbor’s Bt corn or Roundup Ready soybeans that are growing well. After all, we’re organic farmers doing the ‘right’ thing, they conventional farmers doing the ‘wrong’ thing, shouldn’t there be some reward or retribution for that? Keep in mind that after they pay for fertilizer, pesticide, and technology fees out of conventional prices, your organic crops may actually net more income. But more importantly, keep in mind also that they are farmers, just like us, with far more in common with us than different. Its a tough year for them too. If Roundup Ready soybeans are what they think are necessary to save their farms, that is their choice.

Real lasting contentment comes from enjoying our own situation as it is, even if it is not perfect. Real contentment comes from not gloating over the neighbor’s failures or agonizing over their success. Real lasting contentment comes from working with other people and having good friends, a strong supportive community, and happy families. To be sure, sometimes it is mighty hard to see any of our own achievements and success, but there will always be some if we look hard enough.

### **DON’T PANIC!**

When hit with a bad situation, remember that often it is not as hopeless as at first glance and we are not quite as helpless as we feel. We often add to our losses and make them much worse when we panic or give up hope. Take time to calmly think through your options. Our friend, Brett, once said: “when the year handed us a lemon, we decided to make lemonade”. If the wheat is sprouted and the elevator will only pay \$1.50/ bushel for it as ‘feed’, don’t say “I’m going broke on this crop!” Say instead “Wow! I won’t buy feed that cheap again for a while, that’s only \$50/ton” and buy some more from other farmers. Sure, feeding wheat can be a bit tricky but it’s worth \$\$\$ to learn how to use it when it’s that cheap. Besides, aren’t we told that sprouting grains improves their enzyme and vitamin content?

We have a friend always will buy lots of rye when nobody else wants it. He sometimes can buy it as cheap as \$1/bushel. That’s only about \$36/ton! Others might say: “You can’t feed rye, it causes breeding problems or could even cause abortions!” but as far as we know, he never noticed any of these maladies in his steers. Seriously though, Rufus knew that the problems

commonly blamed on rye occur when the grain is moldy and has ergot, so he was careful never to buy moldy rye.

Though it is difficult sometimes to do, it may help to approach the work as 'little bites' rather than ever-growing mountain that will never get all done. Feeling a sense of accomplishment when each 'little bite' get wrapped up can be the fuel needed to get onto the next task and to keep the panic from rising.

In early July, we transplanted our cabbage. They were pale weak little seedlings that had been pulled too early in the greenhouse on the west coast and spent a stressful 2 weeks crossing the country. The first day of transplanting, hot dry winds whipped the life right out of those poor little plants and by the end of the second day, it became apparent that many plants had died. Our first panic inclination was to disk up the field quickly to destroy the evidence of our failure. But rain did come (did it ever!) and while there are many blank spots in the rows, there will be a viable and profitable crop come fall with some really monstrous heads in the thin spots.

In all these cases, surviving the panic impulse and finding a solution takes knowledge of the crop, the problem and the options, and some deliberate restraint. Just feeding moldy grain isn't a wise idea, but moldy grain can be roasted, sprouted grain can be dried, and baleage can be made if you can't get hay dry. There are plenty of old farmers out there that can help work you through a problem - they probably have seen it all before.

### **DIVERSIFY!**

Agronomically, our best defense against a bad season is a diversity of different crops. We talked about this a little more in our June New Farm column, and the value of diversity is certainly evident to us this summer. On our farm, we grow about 12 different crops - winter and spring small grains, corn, soybeans, processing vegetables, hay, plus some crop mixes. Each crop needs different conditions, so in a year of weather extremes, diversity means that at least something is probably doing well.

Corn is looking real good but it will be late this year. Corn likes plenty of water, so even though the snap beans are struggling, the corn is growing. We're trying to spend some time regularly in fields that are doing well, looking at the rapidly growing plants, the straight clean rows, smelling the healthy dirt, feeling the air. In one of our corn fields on a warm day, you can almost hear the corn squeaking as it grows. It is a really neat feeling!

I got a call from a farmer in southern Pennsylvania yesterday whose corn was failing from too much water. Knowing that his corn wasn't going to amount to anything, Greg was wondering whether he could disk it up now and plant barley/pea/oats now to produce a fall baleage crop that should find a strong market next winter with good hay likely to be short. This is creative thinking - looking at a bad situation and identifying an practical, achievable solution. Other solutions like that come along regularly if our minds are open to doing something different.

Diversification can also come from value-added enterprises and creative marketing, especially if little additional time or investment is needed. Lisa told me yesterday that she is certifying her garden along with the farm this year so she could sell excess cucumbers, peppers and zucchini as

organic to the local health food store. David and Kathy are using some of their cattle pasture to run a couple thousand broiler chickens and turkeys in movable pens that they will direct market. Bob's organic beef steers that he's had out in the back pasture are finally ready for butchering and already mail orders are coming in from throughout the Northeast.

### **EQUAL OPPORTUNITY STRESS**

Farm stress on other family members may be different in its effect and response but it is just as legitimate as the stress on the primary farmer. It is a constant balancing act to prevent farm stress from becoming real family stress.

Eighteen years ago, just before Klaas and I were married, my mother-in-law-to-be cautioned me solemnly that 'the weather is never going to be right'. Suburban kid that I was, that didn't make



much sense. Adverse weather had been a minor inconvenience at times, but I never thought of weather as anything serious enough to disrupt a family. Suffice it to say, I've learned a lot in the past 18 years!

One thing I've learned is that whatever the level of farm stress, the most essential job I can do is to maintain normality as much as possible. This means carrying my share of the farm work and the mill work in the background, attending to the children's schedules and their normal parental attention quotient, providing nutritious but flexibly

scheduled meals, and trying to let us all live an ordinary life as cheerfully as possible, while being sympathetic, connected, helpful, calm and self-controlled. No doubt about it, this isn't always easy. And sometimes it is rather hard to maintain my own healthy sense of self-worth when, after all, doing the family laundry is hardly in the same league as pulling out all stops to harvest a field of wheat before a thunderstorm! However, I have come to realize that my equanimity is THE greatest contribution I can make to the overall cause. Normality and cheerfulness are very important, for it definitely doesn't do a family any good when everyone is feeling stressed out.

### **WHAT REALLY MATTERS?**

Ultimately, our most important crop is still upstairs asleep this morning. Peter, at 14, is tall, strong, willingly accepting the responsibility of cultivating carefully and conscientiously for weeks on end, learning about the plants and the soil, shouldering the full-time work of a man and doing a fine job. Peter knows that hard work and getting the job done gives you a kind of pride that today's world rarely offers teenagers. Elizabeth, at 11, is learning to run the old Ferguson tractor with the Lely weeder, her long blonde hair pushed up under one of Klaas' farm-caps to keep it out of her eyes, enjoying the fun of seeing the weeds ripped up and the dirt made clean. She also loves to sit with the pigs, feeding them lambsquarters and scratching behind their ears. Daniel is 7, growing strong and broad across his shoulders, eagerly throwing handfuls of

sprouted wheat to the pigs, happy to come along when Klaas goes for tractor parts or to look at fields.

Last evening just before dark, I stood with Elizabeth and Daniel out in the orchard, eating



peaches picked sun-warm right from the trees, the sweet juice from dripping down our chins. To be sure, we had to eat around the brown rot and the insect damage, but the flavor was incredible as was the feeling of simply being there with my children, laughing at our stickiness, with the damp mist rising around us in the golden light.

These are farm kids who are growing up knowing that the farm is a family and that they are an integral part of it. They have no illusions of farm life being peaceful and pastoral, but they do know that it is a happy, safe, and productive place. They are growing up knowing that both their parents are happy being farmers, even when it rains every day and when the snapbeans hunker down onto the sodden earth. Hopefully they will also remember that we always tried to find time to play badminton in the summer and go sledding in the winter with them, to listen to their stories after school, and to read to them each night.

If so, then we will have been successful.