

Riverbend Farm Newsletter March 16, 2008

It looks like I was a little overly optimistic about not having anymore subzero weather. But now we seem to have turned the corner into spring. The snow is disappearing, the springs down by the river are starting to run. One thing that is a little odd is that the low spots that collect water until the frost goes out are dry. There may not be much frost this year since we had the snow before it got really cold. There must be some frost because the neighbor has not gotten stuck with his manure spreader yet.

Everybody is getting ready for spring. My Dad started lobbying for me to rebuild the carb on his rototiller. It is a clever design. Instead of a float, float valve, and float bowl (troublesome parts), the carb mounts right on the gas tank. Under the carb there is a small cup with a cut out in the side that keeps the fuel level constant. The pressure pulses in the carb drive a fuel pump that fills the cup. The rubber reed valves that make the pump work were eaten away so just the reenforcing threads were all that was left. That makes it hard to start....

I have this 1958 Massey Harris Model 60 pull type combine (a machine the combines the functions of harvester and thresher for grain). The sickle cuts the grain, the thresher beats the grain out of the heads and a fanning mill separates the wheat from the chaff. It is so small (7 foot head) that it is pulled by a tractor. I use it to harvest my cover crop seeds. Last fall the fan blew up. The arms that hold the fan blades broke and now the fan is mostly twisted junk.

Now is the time to fix it. I looked up the part numbers in my parts book, called Waconia Farm Supply, our local AGCO dealer. Massey Harris merged with Ferguson, became MF, and then in the 70s they merged with Oliver and White to become AGCO. The kid at the parts counter could only tell me that they did not have the parts in stock. He had to get Gary, the old guy who knew how to search them out on the internet. No kidding. Gary says 'It looks like there is a dealer in Mt Hope, Kansas who has that fan arms'. This is kind of like finding a blower motor for a '58 Nash at the Dodge garage.

Jerry Howard has been a MH dealer for over 60 years. He has more parts than anyone else in the country. He has new arms for the fan on a 50 year old combine in stock. He also has a junk model 60 combine for parts. He says that he will have to look and see if maybe he can get the fan blades out of it. Jerry calls back and says that he has new fan blades for model 92 combine. They fit the arms perfectly, but the blades are 10" too wide. They would need to be cut down, rewelded, and balanced. Not a problem since the alternative is to make them from scratch. He wants \$17 each for arms and \$12 each for blades. Three days later they are sitting on our porch.

Seeds from the Seed Savers Yearbook have started to arrive. Long Lake Giant and Alice Sunshine snap bush beans came from OR KA A, a bean breeder in Oregon. Crow River Black and Golden Valley dry beans come from IL KE A. By his hand writing, he looks an old guy, from Illinois. Next year I might have enough seeds to sell some of the beans.

The greenhouse got fired up this past week. I was glad to sit out the cold days and the -15° morning the week before. It would have been a huge waste of propane. Bex, our new CSA and field manager, spent most of the week washing out plug trays, filling flats, and seeding about 50,000 onions. I rebuilt the doors for the greenhouse and went to a meeting on Good Agricultural Practices for preventing microbial contamination in produce. Keeping food safe is always a good idea, but a lot of this seemed like CYA.

The USDA got egg on it's face from the e.coli contamination of conventional spinach a couple years ago, and feels the need to shut the barn door after the horses are long gone and the barn has burnt down. E.coli O157:H7 is a disease of feedlot cattle. The last time I checked, plants did not have intestines.

Organic practices require the use of green manure crops, or carefully monitored compost for fertility. If manure is used it has to be applied 180 days before harvest, i.e. the year before. Either of these practices eliminate virtually all pathogens. Having farm workers wash their hands is a great common sense idea, but it is not going to eradicate e.coli O157:H7.

Beyond that, humans have been using manure on crops for about 5000 years without creating pathenogenic e.coli. O157:H7 only appeared since the rise of CAFOs in the 1980s. Now tons of conventional feedlot beef gets recalled every month. To find out more, do a search for 'pollan power steer' on the web.

Instead of solving the problem, the USDA has chosen to react to the symptoms. This is exactly like irradiating beef to clean up fecal contamination due to filthy slaughter house conditions. Stupid. It is absolutely the wrong way to solve the problem. They will always be playing catch up. When you mix feedlots and produce in the Salinas Valley, bad things happen. Contaminated produce cannot be cleaned up without cooking it. Cooked salad is not very popular. Eliminating the source of contamination makes more sense. Ugh.

The engine block for the Super C is back. It had been shot blasted to remove the scale, so I had to paint it or it would get rusty. Now it looks nice, but it will make the rest of the tractor look shabby. I found a basket weeder at Roeters in Michigan. It has just the right sized baskets to fit our rows and it was 40% of the price of a new one. It should show up here some time this week.

On March 6th it was -1° in the morning and one of the chickens laid the first egg of the year. Spring is coming.

Greg