



Roots In The Ground

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Vegetable-Lovers Take A Look At Their Roots



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Bill Halsey stood near a tractor, welcoming members of the Green Thumb's community-supported agriculture group to their biannual tour on October 17 at the Water Mill farm. Hailing from all over Long Island, the members had been invited to hear the stories behind the tomatoes they ate all summer, as well as to pick some pumpkins. Helping families up into a hay-lined trailer, Mr. Halsey chatted, asking members how they were and what was new with the other participants. He no longer drops off the CSA produce on his own, but "Farmer Bill," as some call him, is still a familiar face.

This is the 21st year of the Green Thumb CSA, and the 20th year of the CSA tours at the farm.

"He was one of the first farms that we worked with," said Paula Lukats, program director at Just Food, who was among the visitors in Water Mill. In the early 1990s, Just Food was one of the first organizations to link farmers and consumers by establishing one of the first drop-off points for CSAs in New York City.

"Small-scale farmers don't receive the same government subsidies that make food cheap," Ms. Lukats said, explaining that CSAs can be a boon to family farms.

Fostering a direct relationship between the farmer and consumer, CSA members pay an annual fee that covers the cost of production in exchange for a weekly share of fresh produce. Members typically pay at the beginning of the season, which allows farmers to purchase seeds, make repairs and plan ahead.

The Green Thumb sold produce at the Union Square and Locust Valley farmers markets for one year but discontinued, as it required picking vegetables on the weekends and wasn't a consistent way to sell perishables.

"You go there one rainy day and come back with three-quarters of a truck [unsold]," said Mr. Halsey.

The next year, the farm started a CSA membership with help from Just Food. Green Thumb would drop off fresh organic produce every week to city dwellers, starting in Astoria, Queens, and Cobble Hill, Brooklyn. Now there are four pickup spots, including the Green Thumb farm stand in Water Mill and locations in Huntington and at Brookhaven National Lab, where Green Thumb will have a winter CSA for the first time this year.

The cost of membership is \$18 per week, which entitles the member to fresh vegetables, fruit, flowers and plants from June 1 through December 1. Currently, Green Thumb has around 400 members.

"This one is a special [CSA]," said Joyce Bridges, a Huntington resident who joined this year with her daughter and son-in-law, Kim and Andrew Bykov, when she learned that the Green Thumb gives leftovers to Huntington charities.

In addition to the "amazing variety" of vegetables, Kim Bykov likes the fact that the Halseys send out recipes each week in the boxes.

Mr. Halsey began the tour with an overview of the past season, explaining that the dry summer meant great peppers and tomatoes, but added stress to greens like Swiss chard. As he continued narrating the life of the vegetables before delivery, one could sense that they shared a common enemy.

"Every year they seem to increase their diet," Mr. Halsey said, about deer, with a laugh. Jumping off the tractor, he pointed to some brazen bite marks on the turnips. "Once they start on a crop, they get a taste for it," he said.

So far onions are only family of vegetables completely safe from deer. The farmers try to plant tasty crops like lettuce inside a fence, but they fence in only the land they own.

Crops grown on leased land are unprotected, because "you never know what's going on with land out here," Mr. Halsey said, and "we've lost quite a bit of land to development over the years." Ranked the number-one organic farm stand in New York State, the Green Thumb farms 100 acres, 25 of which are leased.

Mr. Halsey recounted that his late father, Raymond Halsey, had switched to vegetables from wholesale potatoes after World War II, realizing that there were higher profits in the former. Green Thumb is known today for its range of vegetables, but that was not always the case.

"He didn't even know what arugula was," Mr. Halsey said. Raymond Halsey and his family gradually added vegetables as they were requested, also experimenting with new ones, so that they now grow more than 300 varieties.

"It is great, because we try vegetables we've never had before," said Melissa Rodman, a Centerport resident who joined the Green Thumb CSA in Huntington six weeks ago and plans to sign up in June for the next season.

"Farmer Bill introduced me to sorrel." said Isaac Carlos, a soon-to-be 8-year-old from Astoria, Queens, who wanted to go on the tour as part of his birthday celebration.

"I like to see where my sorrel comes from," he explained.