



TWO SMALL FARMS

Community Supported Agriculture

July 30 & 31, August 1 2008

Potato, by Andy Griffin

“What has eyes but does not see?” crooned the singer.
“Does not see, does not see.”

“A potato, stupid!” Lena bellowed from the back seat. When she was five Lena took great pleasure in beating the chorus girls to their punch lines.

“A potato, a potato, a potato,” cooed the backup singers, and Lena laughed. It was the schmaltzy “Silly Songs” again, a grubby kiddie-music cassette making its millionth passage through the bowels of our tape deck.

“Play it again!” yelled Lena, and I did; not because I liked the song but because I love my daughter. The song is all wrong. My sympathies are entirely with the potato. Who are we to call the potato blind?

Look at the Spaniards. They sailed into Peru like the James Gang, but they were so dazzled by the glitter of the gold they were stealing they had no eyes for the potato. Pound for pound the potato has proven to be one of the most productive and nutritious vegetable foods ever developed by humankind. Potatoes provide complex carbohydrates, starches, vitamins, minerals, and proteins and can be cultivated under a wide variety of environmental conditions. They can be stored fresh for long periods of time against the threat of famine. Sun-dried, Inca-style, as chuño potatoes can last almost indefinitely in storage. And potatoes aren't hard to grow.

Potatoes are not typically sown from seed, but they can be. Pre-Columbian Americans developed many distinct potato varieties, or cultivars, by cross pollinating different wild strains and growing out the plants to see what kind of tubers they'd yield. Desirable potato varieties are easily cloned and propagated by slicing a potato into parts, each piece with its own two or three eyes, and planting them deep in well-drained soil. There's enough water and energy stored in a potato tuber to send green shoots to the soil's surface without irrigation. If the potato plant's vigorous roots have a chance to tap into sub-soil moisture, a potato crop may not need to be irrigated even once before setting a bountiful harvest. You can't eat gold.

In the end, the Spaniards squandered the gold they stole from Peru financing religious wars. It fell to Spain's dread enemy, protestant England, to recognize the real treasure of Peru by cultivating the potato. But even the English didn't perceive the commercial potential of the potato at first. Some of the blame for this blindness must be laid on cooks who misunderstood the strange new plant and steamed the foliage

instead of the tubers. Diners got sick from the solanine that's naturally concentrated in the plant's leaves. Solanine is a toxic alkaloid chemically related to nicotine. More to blame were the theologians of the day. Protestants were reluctant to plant potatoes because, having not been mentioned in the Bible, potatoes were imagined to be “of Satan.”

This is not such bigoted botany as you might suspect. The potato is in the Nightshade family, or *Solanaceae*, along with *Datura* and *Belladonna*, two potent vision inducing plants much favored by wizards, shamans, and witches. The potato's flowers and fruits look quite similar to those of Deadly Nightshade. A few Catholics tried cultivating potatoes despite its diabolical cousins, but as a hedge against their spiritual

gamble they planted their crops amid prayer on Good Friday and irrigated the fields with holy water. I've never used holy water on my farm but I can tell you Good Friday is a later planting date for potatoes than I'd choose.

This year Good Friday was March 21st. Next year it will be April 12th. In California, potatoes perform best when they're grown under the cool conditions of late winter that most closely mimic the high Andean altitudes of their wild ancestors, so I prefer to plant my crop in February. A farmer can plant potatoes several weeks before the last frost to ensure a long growing season and a maximum yield. Soil is a good insulator. It will take the potato's new shoots a couple of weeks to reach the surface and by then winter will have passed. Even if the first potato shoots get burned back

by a late frost, the tuber usually contains enough energy to send up a second set of stems quickly. Potatoes planted into warm weather never yield quite as well and are more prone to disease and insect pressure.

Once the potato was adopted in the British Isles it became one of the most efficient engines driving the industrial revolution. Potato cultivation could be carried out with less persistent labor and on fewer acres than other types of medieval farming. Peasants were freed up from the land just in time to be wage slaves in the factories spinning wool. Rural people were shoved off the land to make room for the sheep that would provide the wool for the factories. A meager diet of potatoes, supplemented with a few hardy vegetables from a cottage garden and a little goat milk from goats pastured in ditches and alleys was all the Irish working class could produce on their reduced lands, but it kept them strong enough to survive and multiply. The nutritious potato enabled the process of enclosure and suburbanization to move forward. The British lords had unwittingly come into possession of one

This Week

Fresh-Dug Potatoes ^{HG, MF}

Gypsy Peppers ^{MF}

Lettuce or Salad Mix ^{HG}

Spinach or Turnips ^{HG}

Scallions ^{HG}

Baby Carrots ^{MF}

Strawberries ^{HG} **or Armenian**

Cucumbers ^{MF}

Mystery ^{MF}

Flowers: Mixed Bouquet ^{HG}

of the world's miracle crops, but they couldn't see beyond exploiting their Irish dominions as ruthlessly as the Spanish had violated America.

While the Andean farmers cultivated a rainbow of different varieties Europeans cultivated only a few genotypes. When disease struck the potato crop almost every plant died from the Volga to Donegal Bay. Lack of genetic diversity meant there were no blight-resistant potato clones. Ireland was the hardest hit; over a million people died and another million were motivated by famine to emigrate.

Today Ireland has bounced back, but Peru is still in bad shape. (The consensus euphemism for impoverished, culturally rich countries is like Peru is "developing nation," since it's politically insensitive to call former colonies "recovering nations.") Some tourists compare the squalid poverty they encounter in modern Peru to the splendid ruins of Machu Picchu, the mysterious Atacama mummies or the astronomically significant mathematics of the Nazca Lines and they're left sad and puzzled. Other people, like Erick Von Däniken, author of the worldwide best seller *Chariot of the Gods*, have answers. The Nazca Lines must have been cut across the desert floor to guide UFOs in for landing, they reason. All the surprising wisdom of Peru's past civilizations CAME FROM OUTER SPACE! The people who patiently, intelligently worked for over 4000 years to transform a bitter tuberous herb into a vegetable of world-wide importance are left invisible in the glow of more evolved space beings.

Granted, Von Däniken was a sloppy, sensationalistic researcher, but the huge sales figures for his book demonstrate that his instincts were right in sync with the technophilic values we've acquired in the mainstream. How could wisdom come out of the dirt, anyway? And so what if we ruin this planet? –No sweat. We can build a rocket ship and fly to another one.

What has eyes but does not see? Silly songs aside, it's not the potato that's blind.

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Notes and Recipes

Store everything in the fridge. Top the carrots and store the orange roots without the tops; the potatoes are fresh dug, they aren't 'cured' so they should be used within the week.

Here's how CSA member Lucy C. will use this week's box: The strawberries will be cleaned and cut in half. I'll use them with a little bit of whip cream to top waffles for breakfast on

Events

Friday, August 1: Valley of Heart's Delight's "First Friday Food Fest." Bring a potluck dish using local, seasonal, organic ingredients. This month, Susan Osofsky will be talking about *Cooking from a CSA Box*.

Saturday, August 2: Edible Landscaping Tour. Discover how folks weave edible plants into both garden beds and the landscape! www.conexions.org/vhd or (650)938-9300 x18.

Sunday, August 17th: the 6th Annual OSA/Slow Food Dinner in the Field, benefiting Open Space Alliance and Slow Food Monterey, at High Ground Organics in Watsonville. Featuring Guest Chef Jozseph Schultz of India Joze. \$125/per person. For reservations contact OSA: (831)423-0700 or osa@santacruzosa.org.

Thursday morning. The lettuce and scallions and baby carrots will go into green salads (as will the Armenian cucumber if I get one). I will boil the Red Norland potatoes and toss with butter, lemon juice and some dill I have left from a previous box. The gypsy peppers I'll sauté with onions, mushrooms and sausage. The spinach: if it's young baby spinach will become salad and if it's a little older will be sautéed (recipes below). Eggplant and summer squash if they are in the box will be roasted with a little bit of olive oil and garlic and then tossed with balsamic vinegar.

Tortilla de Patatas, adapted from *The Mediterrasian Way* by Ric Watson and Trudy Thelander

A Spanish Tortilla is similar to an omelet or a frittata. No corn or flour like the Mexican tortillas! Serves 2

1 large potato or 3–4 smaller potatoes, cut into small cubes	2 TBS extra virgin olive oil
3 scallions, chopped, or ½ red onion chopped	2 gypsy peppers, seeds removed and finely diced
4 large eggs	½ tsp. sea or kosher salt
1 TBS finely chopped parsley, or green onion tops!	¼ tsp. black pepper, or to taste

Preheat the broiler. Steam the potato pieces until just soft enough to eat. (Test with a fork. Start testing after about 4 minutes, depends on the size of the cubes.) Heat the oil in a medium skillet over medium heat and cook onion and peppers, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 5 minutes. Add the potato and cook, stirring to combine, for another 2 minutes.

Whisk the eggs together in a bowl with the parsley, salt and pepper. Pour the eggs over the vegetables in the skillet, cover, and cook gently over low heat for 8 minutes. Remove the lid and place under the preheated broiler to cook for 1 minute or until the top is set. Cut into wedges and serve. This can easily be served at room temperature or cold.

Spinach Salad with Bacon and Apples, adapted from *Sunset Favorite Recipes for Salads*

2 large bunches spinach	6 strips bacon
1/3 c. sliced almonds (or you can substitute pine nuts)	¼ c. olive oil
3 TBS white wine vinegar	1/8 tsp salt
1 tsp. sugar	½ tsp dry mustard
dash of pepper	1 large red-skinned apple
3 TBS sliced green onion	

Remove and discard tough spinach stems; wash leaves, drain well, and chill for at least 2 hours. Meanwhile, in a frying pan over medium heat, cook bacon until crisp; drain (reserving 1 TBS drippings), crumble, and set aside. Place almonds in remaining bacon drippings and sauté until lightly browned (about 3 or 4 minutes); lift from pan and set aside.

Combine oil, vinegar, salt, sugar, mustard, and pepper; blend well. Core and dice apple. Break spinach into bite-size pieces and place in a large bowl; add onion, apple, and almonds. Pour dressing over salad and toss gently.

Everything in your box and the flowers are organically grown. From Mariquita Farm: baby carrots, gypsy peppers, mystery, some potatoes, Armenian cucumbers. From High Ground: lettuce, spinach, turnips, scallions, strawberries, some potatoes, flowers.