

The Oak Hill Farmer

www.oakhillfarm.net

farming in balance with nature

August 2009

Bee Well

So many years ago, I can't remember how many, when I lived in San Francisco, I started becoming a farmer. A friend, Bob Phillips, had given me a book titled "Grow It" by Richard Langer, and that book resided on my bedside table to be absorbed chapter by chapter by me at bedtime. Each subject related to a closed system small farm: vegetables, berries, fruit trees, worms, compost, farm animals and of course, bees! Pretty soon the postman started delivering baby chicks, fruit catalogues and colonies of bees to my front door. The chicks resided in the basement and traveled to Sonoma on the weekends with various children and dogs. The bees were appropriately installed into their new hive, also mail ordered, from the Walter T. Kelley Co. in Clarkson, Kentucky. on the country property my parents owned. I struggled for years with swarms, extractors re-queening and inappropriate colonizing (like on my mothers roof, causing honey to drip down into the kitchen) and finally moved the bees to the Valley where someone else could lug those supers around!

That someone else is Serge Lebesque who manages some 40 hives here at Oak Hill Farm; and is the host of the Western Bee Society meeting, which will be held here in August at The White Barn. Serge manages the bees without the use of chemicals and raises his own queens, selected for their hybrid vigor. The beautiful and gentle Italian bees with their 2 or 3 yellow stripes feast on a variety of nectar and pollen producing plants. The cacophony of buzzing on the broccoli gone to flower in early spring was deafening; and the spectacle of bees amid the perfumed orange blossoms in May was stunning. How can we take this tiny collector for granted when its contribution is inestimable?

Now I have the luxury of simply being an observer of insects. I always stop to watch the pollinizers on flowering plants; and in most cases the dominant bee is the Italian, *apis mellifera*. (I often wonder how the Italian bee got to America from Italy; on the Mayflower? We know beekeeping is an ancient art; skeps are depicted on the walls of Egyptian tombs.) This year some apple varieties have no fruit; were the bees hive bound because of rainy weather when the trees were in flower? Despite my clumsy attempts to raise bees and collect honey, I am still fascinated by these community oriented hard workers and happy to live among so many of them. --- by Anne Teller



In Bee Heaven:

An Interview with Beekeeper Serge Lebesque

The honeybees made beelines for their hives under the leafy trees. The shadows lengthened, the sun went down in the sky, and the temperature dropped slowly. At Oak Hill Farm, it was the end of another perfect summer day – for bees and for human beings. Serge Lebesque sat on a stone bench in the shade. He looked down at the Red Barn, at the fields and the fruit trees, and for an hour or so he fielded questions about honeybees.

---Jonah Raskin, for the Oak Hill Farmer

Oak Hill Farmer: What's happening right now with the bees at Oak Hill?

Serge Lebesque: We're just past the peak of the bee season; in terms of numbers the bee population here is on the decline. It's part of the natural cycle, and nothing to be alarmed about. In fact, these bees are very healthy.

OHF: What would a day in the life of a bee look like this time of year?

SL: The bees don't sleep in the way we do. They're active during the night, though they have periods of rest. As soon as the sun comes up and the temperature reaches 50 degrees, the forager bees fly out of the hive to collect pollen and nectar from flowers, bring it back and process it. They add enzymes that break down complex sugars that are found in nectar into simple sugars - mainly fructose and glucose. They store pollen, which is their source of protein, and use it to feed their young so that they develop properly. The forager bees are busy all day long.

OHF: What are the seasonal changes for the bees?

SL : When it's very hot in the summer some bees collect water and deposit thousands of droplets on the combs to cool off the hive. In the winter when it's cold they produce heat so that the temperature gets up to 93 or 94 degrees around their young. Inside the hive, the bees do all sort of chores: First they clean the comb. Then, some of them feed the young and provide royal jelly to the queen. They also produce wax to build the comb, and they help with the storage of the nectar before becoming foragers.

OHF: How much honey is produced here?

SL: That is highly variable. It is a very modest amount. For the previous two years it was very dry in the spring and nectar and pollen were in short supply. This year is

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Oak Hill's bees sit in an incredible landscape of produce and flowers.



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better. We had a spring harvest of honey and there will be another harvest at the end of the summer. I make sure the bees have what they need; I give priority to them and I only harvest the surplus honey. More honey is produced here than I can carry myself, but there is never enough for everyone who wants to buy it. Demand exceeds supply.

OHF: Where is Oak Hill Farm honey sold?

SL: Only at the Red Barn Store.

OHF: What do you do to improve the quality of life for the bees?

SL: I provide them with hives that enable them to be healthy. I want to give them a nest that isn't stressful. Also, of course, I make sure there isn't a queen failure. With bees it's the entire colony that matters rather than the individual bee. They're social insects and need to be together to survive. Isolate any of them and they won't live. Each and every bee, from the queen to the drones, has roles to play. As their beekeeper, I want to make sure that the hive thrives. A bee colony has the potential to live forever, if you replace missing or failing individuals. I also don't interfere with the process of natural selection. One of the cornerstones of my approach to beekeeping is not to artificially sustain a hive. My bees are never exposed to antibiotics, or chemical treatments. I trust their innate strength.

OHF: If we went to Midi-Pyrenees, the region of France where you are from, would the bee story be different there?

SL: Not significantly, though the climate and the terrain are different. If I were to keep bees in France I would use the same guiding principles, which are to be a good steward of the bee species and not to interfere with the process of natural selection. There, as well as here, bees are important to the functioning of our ecosystem because of the pollination work they perform, and we have to respect them.

OHF: From your point of view is Oak Hill Farm different or special?

SL: The way that Oak Hill Farm is managed complements my approach to beekeeping. Bees here have access to a wide variety of plants. The diversity of crops is beneficial and is much better than in monocultures. There is always something in bloom, and there are no chemical insecticides or pesticides here. We need more places like Oak Hill Farm. The environment is clean; the pond provides the bees with fresh water, and their food sources are varied.

OHF: Are there changes happening in beekeeping?

SL: More and more, beekeepers are trying to stay away from using antibiotics and other chemicals. They're moving away from conventional methods to more organic ones. Of course, when compared to the country as a whole, Oak Hill Farm is an exception, but there are beekeepers elsewhere doing what I do here, which is to be a good steward.

OHF: Do you eat a lot of honey?

SL: About 150 pound a year. I weigh 150 pounds so I eat the equivalent of my own weight in honey every year. I start the day with honey in the morning at breakfast. Sometimes I add honey to water, mix it and drink it, and find that it's invigorating. Honey gives energy. It's healthier for you than white sugar because the body doesn't have to break it down. You also get vitamins and minerals from honey and it tastes delicious.

OHF: Are there variations in the quality of the honey?

SL: It is different from spring to fall and from year to year. Honey is an expression of the land where the bees are kept. The honey that is produced here tastes different



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STAFF PROFILE

David Cooper

David is the assistant produce grower at Oak Hill; this is his second year at the farm. He spends a large part of his time working in the fields with the crew, planting, weeding, harvesting, and packing produce, but he also drives the delivery van and occasionally fills in at the farmers' market stand. Although he had been an avid gardener for many years, David didn't make the jump from environmental engineer to farmer until he completed the six-month Farm and Garden Apprenticeship Program at UC Santa Cruz in 2007. After spending six months with his hands in the dirt, he just couldn't go back to his desk job. David brings to the farm a wonderful sense of organization and care for the details that make a huge

difference in the quality of what we offer. He considers himself lucky to have the opportunity to steward such a beautiful piece of land.

There's not a vegetable or fruit grown at Oak Hill that David doesn't eat and enjoy; however, he has a particular fondness for bok choy and tat-soi and is eagerly awaiting the season's first melons. He's happy that the Little Gem lettuce and Padrón peppers have been such hits, and he's confident that the okra will be received with similar enthusiasm.

When not at work, David enjoys cruising around town on his bicycle, preserving as much of the harvest as possible, and tending his plot of heirloom dry beans.

David has also been collaborating with entomologists from UC Berkeley on harvestable herbal hedgerows at Oak Hill. The goal of the project is to



evaluate the attractiveness of nine different herbs and/or flowers (alyssum, buckwheat, phacelia, Thai basil, wild arugula, wild mustard, white borage, cosmos, and nasturtium) to syrphid flies. Syrphid flies are important allies in pest control on organic/sustainable farms because their larvae feed on aphids. Alyssum commonly is planted in lettuce fields to attract syrphids; however, the alyssum does not provide a cash crop for the farmer. The project is evaluating the effectiveness of the above-listed herbs/flowers to attract syrphids and other beneficial insects, while also providing a cash crop for the farm to harvest.

◀ **The insectary planting hums with life in the sun.**



VEGETABLE OF THE MONTH

Sweet Corn *Zea mays*

Oak Hill grows a lot of corn each summer. Planting begins once the soil warms to 55-60 degrees in April and continues at two week intervals until mid-July. 6-7 plantings of approximately 1/4 acre should allow us to have corn from July through October for most of those that want it. The variety we have settled on here is called Delectable, available through Johnny's catalog. It is considered a "midseason bi-color" approximately 80 days from planting to harvest.

Yields are roughly 1 ear per row foot, giving us about 2-3,000 ears every 2 weeks. That may sound like a lot, but considering the input costs and 2 acres of land, it's near the bottom of our profitability goals. We all get excited about corn however,



so we keep growing it to celebrate summer!

What about those corn worms? They are certainly a problem for organic producers and consumers that are squeamish. Usually they are less plentiful at the beginning of the season. Once they find the crop, they move in and reproduce, moving from planting to planting and increasing in number. Least you think they just gorge themselves unfettered, the defense we use is a BT laced vegetable oil, applied on each ear hopefully before the worm moves in. As the season progresses, we revert to clipping the ends off the corn.

Corn can be prepared in any number of ways. Most people take off the husk and silk, then steam it. 3-5 minutes should be plenty of time. Something that tastes so good raw, only needs to be heated enough to melt the butter. And you really only need the butter, to make the salt stick. It also works well on the grill. Leave the husk on but remove the silk. It will steam in the husk.

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than the honey from five miles away, and the honey that's here today has a different flavor than the honey from a month ago because different plants are in bloom. Honey is also appreciated for its healing properties. It is effective if you have a burn or a cut, for example. A wound will heal more quickly if you put honey on it. The tissues stay clean, moist and disinfected. Some people claim that if you eat honey before you go to bed you will lose weight while you sleep.

OHF: How did you become interested in bees?

SL: It started by chance. In the 1990s, a neighbor came to me and asked if I wanted his beehive. I said yes, and so I quickly became a beekeeper. I knew next to nothing about bees, when I started. As I learned, I discovered the fascinating world of honeybees and beehives. It became a passion. Now, when I open a hive to inspect it, I feel as though I am entering a special world. All my attention is on the bees. Nothing else exists. It's relaxing.

OHF: Are you afraid of bees?

SL: Maybe initially I was. That's a natural reaction. But I soon realized that I didn't need to be afraid. Human beings tend to be afraid of anything that stings, but bees will




not sting you if you don't disturb their hive, which is their home. Hornets and yellow jackets are different. You have to be careful around them. Bees only sting to defend their hive from predators— bears, raccoons, and skunks.

OHF: Where the hives are located – is this a good place for them?

SL: Yes, it is. Anne Teller picked this spot. The trees break the north wind and protect the hives in winter. There is good exposure to the morning sun and there is filtered light on summer afternoons, too. The farm crops are close by and the pond is right here. This is a paradise for bees

OHF: What about bees and California? What's the story?

SL: Honeybees are not native to California. They arrived here at about the time of the Gold Rush. The person who gets credit for bringing bees to California is John Harbison. John Muir wrote about bees in the later part of the nineteenth century. When you read his work and then look around, you see how much California has been changed by urban development and agribusiness. That's all the more reason why I appreciate the uniqueness of Oak Hill Farm. 

LOCAL AG NEWS

- Hilda Schwartz will be displaying her colorful photographs at the Red Barn Store during the month of August. Hilda is the market manager of the Sonoma Farmers' Markets and has used that venue to capture the freshest images in the county, including many from Oak Hill's market stand.
- Don't miss the movie Food Inc. for a scathing view of industrialized food. It makes us appreciate Oak Hill Farm, all the more.
- Time for Lunch? Now? September 7th, Labor Day, will see cities across the country gathering to share a meal and send a message to their legislators: "It's time to provide our children with real food at school." This fall, Congress will decide whether to update the Child Nutrition Act which is the law that determines what children eat at school every day. The closest Lunch, sponsored by Slow Food, is being held in Napa. Call for more information.
- September 18-20, Cornerstone Sonoma hosts The Late Show Gardens featuring latest designs for gardening during global climate change, with display gardens, exhibits, vendors, lectures, food and wine. 10 am to 5 pm. Fee, \$20-\$10.
- Saturday & Sunday September 26 & 27th, 10 a.m. – 5 p.m., Farm Trails is holding a county-wide, Weekend Along the Farm Trails, a special weekend of farm activities and informative tours. Oak Hill Farm will be participating by holding free tours at 10 am both Saturday and Sunday. To get a year-round Map & Guide see: <http://www.farmtrails.org/index.html>

AVAILABLE IN AUGUST

SALAD GREENS Salad Mix, Lettuces

HERBS Basil, Chives, Lovage, Oregano, Parsley, Rosemary, Sorrel Tarragon and Thyme

VEGETABLES Red and Gold Beets, Carrots, Celery, Chard, Corn, Cucumbers, Eggplant, Garlic, Green Beans, Kale, Leeks, Onions, Peppers, Tomatoes and Zucchini

FRUIT Raspberries, Gravenstein apples, peaches and pears (by end of month)

FLOWERS Agrostemma, Amaranth, Asters, Bells of Ireland, Bupleurum, Calendula, Calliopsis, Campanula, Coriopsis, Cornflower, Cosmos, Dill, Gladiolas, Gomphrena, Marigolds, Millets, Safflower, Stock, Sunflowers (Joker, Sungold, Sunrich), Yarrow, Zinnias

You can find Oak Hill Farm produce on the menu at the following local restaurants: Artisan Bakery ♦ Cafe LaHaye ♦ Depot Hotel ♦ El Dorado Kitchen ♦ Epicurean Connection ♦ Estate in Sonoma ♦ fig cafe ♦ girl and the fig ♦ Grindstone Bakery ♦ Harvest Moon Cafe ♦ Kenwood Restaurant ♦ La Salette ♦ The Lodge at Sonoma ♦ Saffron ♦ Westerbeke Ranch ♦ Wild Thyme Catering



Amazing Corn

By Jonah Raskin

I call it corn. Almost everyone I know calls it corn, too. It's also called "maize," which comes from a Taino Indian word. Whatever you call it - "corn" or "maize" - it is one of the most amazing crops in the world, with a long, rich history that goes back thousands of years. It's no wonder that Christopher Columbus brought it back from the Americas to show Queen Isabella of Spain in 1493. With its golden kernels it must have seemed to Columbus and to the Spaniards as radiant and as valuable as gold itself.

Of all the golden vegetables I have ever grown it is my all-time favorite. I always liked planting the seeds in spring, and months later I took great delight in walking through the rows of corn that towered above my head. I also always looked forward to picking the ears - I can still hear that sound as I broke an ear from the stalk - and, of course, I loved to eat corn just minutes after it was harvested. Corn-on-the-cob with black pepper is a favorite, but I also like corn fritters with jalapenos, and over the last 20 years or so polenta - which is made from corn - has become a staple of my diet.

Sometimes it seems as though I could write a whole book about the role of corn in my own diet. Or write a book about the global economy by focusing just on corn. More corn is grown around the world today than any other grain, including wheat and rice. The United States produces about 40% of the total global harvest - more than 330 million tons, and the demand keeps rising. There does not seem to be an end in sight to our dependence on corn most of which is cultivated with chemical fertilizers that

damage the soil, and poison our lakes and river, from the upper reaches of the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico. The plant that is beautiful to behold, to smell and to touch - corn silk is divine - has been turned into a kind of monster by agribusiness, and the federal government, along with the beef industry that depends on corn, and fast-food chains, too. Yikes!

Though I have always liked to grow and to eat corn, I never really thought much about its part in the U.S. economy until 2006 when I heard Michael Pollan rail about corn on National Public Radio. Soon afterward, I read his book *Omnivore's Dilemma*, which has a long section about corn as a cornerstone of U.S. agriculture, farming, supermarket shopping and politics, too, since corn farmers receive huge amounts of money - subsidies - from Washington, D.C.

Probably the average American citizen did not think long and hard about the realities of corn, either, before Michael Pollan and *Omnivore's Dilemma* came along - unless that average citizen happened to be growing hundreds of acres of corn in Iowa, or another part of the Corn Belt, or happened to buy corn by the ton to feed herds of steer and mass produce beef. Maybe, too, that average citizen thought about corn if he was a part of the food industry that uses corn syrup, and various derivatives of corn, in almost everything that's eaten, from hams to crackers, cereals to colas, hot dogs to mustards. If we are what we eat, as many a food writer has observed, we are corn through and through.

Corn is everywhere and in nearly everything; just look

“If we are what we eat, we are **CORN** through and through.”

at the labels – fructose and glucose are pumped into all kinds of products. The reliance on corn has helped to warp American farming and agriculture. It has made us much more unhealthy than we have ever been before as a country. All that corn sugar doesn't help a human body, and it has contributed to diabetes, obesity and heart problems. Iowa farmers are forced, by market conditions, and by the government, to increase corn production beyond reason; the rising price of oil and gas has also prompted farmers to grow corn that is transformed into ethanol to fuel cars and trucks. As a country we are literally and figuratively addicted to corn.


At Oak Hill, Paul Wirtz has major responsibility for the corn crop that's planted six or seven times, every two weeks, from April through July. When the first ears are being picked in the field, the last of the corn is being planted. Born and raised in Central Wisconsin, in a family of farmers, Paul saw a lot of corn in the fields close to home. “It was all around us,” he said. “My uncles grew acres and acres and fed it to their cattle. My grandfather also raised corn.” Oak Hill grows only about two acres of corn each season in part because it's a labor-intensive crop that takes up a lot of space and demands a lot of time. In fact, each ear is anointed by hand with an organic oil to keep away worms. “In many ways it's a fascinating crop to study, especially the sugar gene in corn,” Paul said. “But from our point of view it's not a crop that we want to expand.”

The point of this article – to be absolutely clear – is not to terrify readers about the evils of the corn industry, or to persuade everyone never to buy, cook or eat an ear of corn again. After all, moderation in all things including farming is a good idea, and the modest cultivation of corn won't damage the natural environment at Oak Hill or on any other farm, much as the modest eating of corn won't injure a person's own internal environment, either – unless you

happen to have a rare allergy to corn. For guidance, we might look not to scientists or government officials, but to the indigenous people of the Americas who began to cultivate corn perhaps as long ago as 12,000 years in what is now Mexico, and who regarded it as a kind of sacrament from the earth itself, and something to be respected and honored – not made into a commodity just for profit.

The indigenous peoples who turned a wild species of grass into a cultivated grain in the highlands of Oaxaca and Jalisco, long before the coming of Columbus, never grew just corn, though corn was a staple of their diet. They also grew beans and squash – an example of companion planting at its best, and a stroke of agricultural genius. The beans curled around the maize, and used it for support as they climbed to the sun for essential light.

Beans added nitrogen to the soil – essential for the growth of corn. Squash plants, with their large green leaves, provided ground cover that kept weeds down, and also helped to prevent evaporation and keep moisture in the soil. That system commonly known as “the three sisters” worked for thousands of years; it enabled the Aztecs and the Mayans to create complex civilizations. It didn't deplete the soil, and it made effective use of the limited supply of water. A diet of beans, corn and squash was healthy, too, and provided protein, calories, minerals and vitamins.

We can't, of course, go back in time to America as it was thousands of years ago, but we can adapt to our own world some of those ancient principles about farming in accord with nature not antagonistic to it. That's what Oak Hill Farm is largely about. The bi-color corn that's grown here is also superlatively good. It's fresh, tasty, nutritious, and beautiful to behold, as well. Try it next time you're in the Red Barn Store or at the Farmers' Market. We think you'll agree. 

Two plantings of corn two weeks apart,
grow fast once the weather warms.

