

want to do it with a tractor like that? How do you think the crop would respond to that?

Sometimes, the conversation might turn to: well, if you use this piece of equipment, you'll have to space your rows this way. Is your tractor built to handle beds of that size? How do you think the crop will respond to that? What effect does that kind of equipment have on the soil? Would you try to compensate for that?

The list of questions will go on, and we keep evolving our ideas. This will be of enormous benefit to us as we begin devising farm and business plans later this fall. Few farms are the same, and if they are, there's a good chance the farmers aren't the best they can be. Each canvas asks different brushes of us.

Next week: part three, exposure. Till then,

Be Great.

Mike



**Farm Manager:**

Michael Snow  
msnow@accokeek.org

**Apprentice Farmers:**

Michael Fizdale  
Matt Newlin

**Ecosystem Farm Crew:**

Hannah Bauman

**Design, Editing, and Production:**

Julie Brunton  
Laura Ford

**Accokeek Foundation**

3400 Bryan Point Road,  
Accokeek, MD 20607

Phone: 301.283.2113

Fax: 301.283.2049

[www.accokeek.org](http://www.accokeek.org)

**UPCOMING EVENTS**

*(complete details at [www.accokeek.org](http://www.accokeek.org))*

**COLONIAL CANDLE-MAKING**

**Saturday, September 12, 2009**

**1:30-3:30 p.m.**

**Visitor Center, Rain or Shine**

**\$20 Non-Members, \$15 Members**

Join us for this hands-on workshop to learn the art of candle-making. You will learn about wicks, waxes, uses of candles in the 1700s, and safety instruction. We will also discuss recipes and ideas for making your own candles at home.

**NATURE NUTS**

**Tuesday, September 15, 2009**

**11:00 a.m.-noon**

**Education Center, Rain or Shine**

**\$6.00 Non-Members, \$5.00 Members**

**Limited to 15 Children, Ages 3-5**

**Registration Required**

This fun-filled hour of exploration at the National Colonial Farm's Museum Garden is the perfect setting to learn about the wonders of nature. Designed for children ages 3-5, the children will hear a story, create a craft project, and go on an outdoor adventure. Children must be accompanied by an adult.

**For more information please call 301.283.2113, or email us [accofound@accokeek.org](mailto:accofound@accokeek.org).**

# FIELD NOTES

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## Quick Field Update

We received about five inches of rain this past week, which leaves us just a little "behind" where we'd like to be. While gentle rains did water in more chard, beets, turnips, and carrots, as well as some cover crops in anticipation of next spring, we have some more of these as well as our fourth round of cole crops, a planting of celery, and cover crops waiting for things to dry out just enough. With a few dry days before another rain, we'll be back in

business. It's a funny and exciting time of year. We're still harvesting summer crops, we're planting and cultivating fall crops, and we're getting ready for spring by planting covers that will, we hope, allow us windows to take advantage of that cool season. Inside the high tunnels, where everything is always hunky-dory (right?), we're still trying to find the magic formula for germinating seed in our framed beds. Surprisingly, we've had a tough time of it in the new tunnel. We're hovering over salad mix, radishes, and a late planting of cucumber.

## Figs

Figs are remarkable, and I love picking them. I think I wrote the same last year, and maybe I will again next year. It's like being an ape in a fig forest. Pick, pick, pick, eat, pick, eat, pick...We harvest into buckets we attach to our belts so we don't have far to reach.

The thing with figs is that they need to ripen on the tree. Ours don't keep well. They are unlike tomatoes, which you can pick

## THIS WEEK'S HARVEST

**Basil**  
**Beans**  
**Figs**  
**Garlic**  
**Peppers**  
**Potatoes**  
**Scallions**  
**Summer Greens**  
**Tomatoes**

with just a blush of color to ripen on the windowsill. Pick figs early and ship to a restaurant? No. Wait until they are soft on the tree? Yes. Wait until they turn golden, and cracked, and then purple? Yes, better. Wait until that purple thing has a drop of “sugar” dripping from the opening that is on the fruit? The ultimate. The best. The sweetest. Not all varieties do this, and less so in moist years, when they are more likely to rot before reaching that point. Ours did really well in dry years like 2007 and 2008.

So it has to be at least pretty darn close to ripe to develop the best flavor, and we pick them just before SHAREs so they will be as close as possible. We’ve experimented with picking them at different stages of development, and what we know for sure is that the best ones are the ones that look the worst. We know them because the wasps want them, the birds want them, and even butterflies want them. The ripest are the sweetest are the softest. They are highly perishable, so eat quickly.

### **Training, continued from last week**

#### **Conversation**

The work is the most important part, because we can read, we can watch, we can listen, but without doing and without practice we aren’t much. We will learn the most by making the farm successful in its other missions. This work must happen first, so there is a flow and ebb of “academic” training with the ebb and flow of work in the season. Spring and fall offer more opportunities to slow down and talk.

But the work needs context. Now, I won’t claim to be a master farmer. Nor will I claim to be infallible. I know what I know, make my plans, and meanwhile am eager to improve the way we do things. Here we do a fair bit of learning together because we farm this challenging site, and have to respond critically to our plans and to changes in our plans. We evaluate the responsiveness of the farm to our plans and actions, and of our actions and plans to the farm – the things we do when starting any farm and what we will do when we start our own.

I present this farm as Montessori Farm School rather than a traditional apprenticeship, as there are many opportunities to experiment, to study, and to pursue projects (even entrepreneurial ones). Admittedly, it is a

challenge to balance these opportunities with the daily work *that must get done!* But you will see the genius of the farmers-in-training in the field. For example, Michael took the small sheet mulching project and reproduced it on a large scale, where we hope to plant fall crops. And again, we are re-envisioning the flower and herb area with Matt’s new ideas. And there are the little things that you don’t see: harvest techniques, organization, bed-shaping approaches, crop ideas.

New ideas come out of conversation. Conversation takes many forms. It is anything from formal discussion preceded by readings, to workshops we put on here at the Foundation or take elsewhere, to speakers who come to the farm, and it can be the daily banter of three people working together on a small farm for nine months. Occasionally, yes, it is the “because I said so!” of a hectic day. It is especially the explanation of the What and the Why of each task.

With each task there is the How (how I want this done) and the Why. Why do I want something done this way? Why are we doing it in the first place? Why are we doing it differently than the last time? While I often want things done my way because I’ve personally found it to be good practice and an effective way to do a task, keeping our focus on the goals of the task keeps us open to new techniques and strategies.

We do a lot of our work by hand and with simple tools. There is thought behind this. In learning the basics of transplanting, cultivating, harvesting, we come face to face with the work of growing food. There is a lot to learn in plant ecology, entomology, soil husbandry (and time and money management!) by pulling weeds by hand, by prepping beds by hand, by transplanting or seeding by hand, watering by hand. We may let insects live that otherwise harm our crops – not just for philosophical reasons, but because they offer a chance to watch full lifecycles, and to watch if or when nature will balance itself. Are there better, more efficient ways of doing things? Yes! Emphatically, there are many ways to do things!

So a lot of our conversation becomes: wouldn’t you...? What if we...?

Good. Look that up. Check out this catalogue. You should ask So-and-So, he uses this strategy. What do you think? What would you try? Would you