



# Saugeen River CSA

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## Summer Newsletter

Hello everyone,

It has been a while since the last newsletter. As I write this we are having one of the few rain showers of the past couple of months. Hot and dry has been the order of the summer. Ontario has been drier than average, some places being the driest on record. Within the CSA and farmer networks I am a part of, everyone is talking about the impact. This will be my impact letter, not just about the dryness, but also the early spring conditions.

First of all there's an old farmer saying, "Too little rain will scare you to death, but too much rain will kill you." What this means is that although droughts are worrisome, floods are worse. Some of you might remember back in April, Chatsworth Township declared a state of emergency when the town of Williamsford flooded. It was a very wet spring, with lots of mud, since we didn't have much snow to cover the ground over winter.

Then it turned hot and dry, but only for two or three weeks, which gave us time to get the first transplanting and seeding done. Then we got snow in May, which stayed around longer than a May snow usually does. Then it got hot and dry again. By early June we seemed well into a hot summer, so we planted all our frost sensitive crops out on time. And what would you know, on

June 10 we had a light frost, as the temperature dropped. This frost wiped out our first cucumber planting and most of our melon crop. About a quarter of the first zucchini planting was also killed, and the rest set back a bit. These plants were under row cover and were still affected. The basil, even though it was in the greenhouse, was also damaged.



Then the pattern of hot and dry seemed to settle in. We continued to get the odd shower and thunderstorm through June, enough for me to feel okay with not

irrigating. As it continued to stay dry, though, it was clear we needed to compensate somehow.

We have an irrigation system that we used every year since we started in 1997, sometimes we used it more sometimes less. The last two years we had consistent enough rain that we never even set the system up, whereas in 2013 we used it every day for most of the summer. This system was modeled after the one used by the CSA growers I apprenticed with, and is very versatile for small scale very diversified vegetable growing. It uses lay-flat hoses, what many people associate with fireman hoses, which can be driven over by tractors. What I found however in 2013 when we used it so much, was that it doesn't work so well when using mostly horse drawn equipment, which has many tools that are dragged on the ground, or have metal wheels that would damage the hoses.



In 2013 we had to spend a great deal of time taking apart the hoses to move them out of the way, and then setting them up again to water. This took all of us a couple hours each day, and the system could only water so much at a time because of the rise in elevation from the creek we were drawing water from. I even sometimes had my doubts as to how effective the watering was, since crops would often suffer in drought anyway, even with the irrigation. The time spent dealing with all the watering would almost double sometimes when something went wrong... a burst hose, a clogged carburetor. So this year, when the prospect of setting the system up came to seem to be a reality, I just couldn't justify the work. It just made no sense for the result. Another factor was the fuel. Each time it would run cost around \$15 in gas. But we needed to do something since it was very dry.

Throughout my farming career, I have known several vegetable growers who do not use irrigation at all. This includes the horse farmers who I have based a good deal of my crop rotation and soil preparation on – Eric and Ann Nordell. I spoke with them years ago specifically about growing vegetables without irrigation, and what they emphasized was how important it is to cultivate shallowly during the crop production year. This is complimented by tilling very lightly around the crops after any

rain, to help the soil hold any moisture that comes. This is what we have been doing now for the past few years, and it definitely makes a huge difference. However, the Nordell's do not do much transplanting. Almost all of their crops are direct seeded. My experience with weather like this year, is that if newly transplanted crops don't get water within a few days, they will die, whereas direct seeded crops can go quite a while without any rain.



In the past we have sometimes hand watered early transplants from a tank with a gravity fed hose. We have based our new watering system on this, but have gotten a bigger tank and a reel to make moving the hose around easier. So, we are watering in each new transplanting shortly after putting it in the ground, and sometimes going back to do a second watering. This takes one person a couple hours, not every day, but most. It saves us a great deal of time, and puts water only right where we want it.

I'm not 100% happy with this system, but I was not happy with our previous one either, but I feel like it is working fairly well, considering the year. In speaking with other growers, who are using an irrigation

system like our old one and watering every day, they are still experiencing crop shortfalls, and some of our crops are actually doing better than theirs. I'm still trying to come up with something better, and will keep everyone posted with any progress!

A side impact of the hot dry conditions has been pests. We used to have a groundhog issue here, but since the coyotes moved back to the area, they have not been too much trouble for the past nearly 10 years. This year however has been different. Either the coyotes haven't been as effective, or more likely, there is less other things for the groundhogs to eat. Whatever the reason, they have come back this year and took me a bit by surprise. Half of our first cabbage, kale and kohlrabi planting was destroyed by groundhogs before I realized what happened. They also took bites out of our lettuces and peas. I invested in a netting to keep them out of the lettuce, and we set up a fence to keep them out of the kale and cabbage. These things re-grew, but couldn't develop to full potential. The peas however, despite never being watered and getting chomped by groundhogs, were some of the most productive we have ever had!!! It is possible to find the positive!



The other pest that is worse than normal is the flea beetle. These bugs eat anything in the brassica family: kale, bok choy, turnips, cabbage, cauliflower and are always more

active in hot dry conditions. I have to say they are the worst I have ever seen them. They are usually gone sometime in September, and then the fall brassicas can grow better when it is cooler and without any interruption. I'm hoping this pattern stands.

No matter how much we water, it is not the same as rain. Let's hope the pattern turns around soon.

I usually try to be positive, and things could always be worse, but it has been a very challenging year. Generally with droughts there is a drop in production of many crops. We are having to harvest the lettuce smaller, since they are tending to rot in the heat before they can reach full size. It is one of the worst onion crops this year that I can remember. A good portion of the crop just didn't develop at all... actually barely stayed alive. I think I did one cultivation pass that was a bit too deep when the soil was a bit too dry. We have had poor germination on the fall carrots and beets, so will have less of these this fall. The red pepper and eggplant plants are small and are not going to be able to produce to their full potential.

There're a couple reasons though that there will still be plenty of food for the CSA. First, we didn't actually get as many members this year as I was hoping. Why I think that is might be a topic for another newsletter! Also, the CSA has always been the priority for the farm. The Owen Sound Market, although we plan to grow enough to sell there too, is a buffer, so when we have an abundance of a crop we can sell it there, but when we are short, just the CSA members

get that crop. This does mean that finances will be tighter this year.

Enthusiasm is essential in agriculture. It is what can carry you through challenging times. There are many things that can dampen enthusiasm: having to work in extreme weather conditions, unexpected pest issues, suffering crops or animals, unhappy customers. Sometimes I can have the impulse to just plow everything under and start over... which of course I can't do until next year! So we carry on with the consequences of the year.

But... there is a great deal to be grateful for! The garlic is a beautiful crop this year... one of the better years. Our tomatoes, although slow to ripen, look to be bountiful. The chard is growing amazingly well, despite only being hand watered once. The pea and bean plants are exploding like fireworks, although a shorter harvest, they have been productive. One day as I was checking the readiness of the bean crop, as the dust was floating up from each step, I could see the grasses around the garden turning brown. The sun was very hot and it hadn't rained more than a couple drops for a month. I wondered how the plants were managing, and was just kind of amazed they were still alive. I picked a bean and bit it. There was that crisp fresh experience, and there was water in the bean. It was startling. I was a bit in awe of the resourcefulness of the plants in their desire to grow and provide food for us. At that moment, I really enjoyed that bean.

Cory