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New Friends and Odd Weather

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Good morning from Portland, Oregon. It?s yet a little early in the day so I am taking the time to enter this first post. Soon I am out to the garden. But let me first say, I?m happy and honored to be on board. What a lovely lot we are. Part radical, part homespun, part salt-of-the-earth and part (If I am to be personal) crazy. And with threads spreading throughout the world, we international kitchen gardeners make a strong web which is exactly what we will need in the days and years before us.

You know, I have been thinking a lot about the weather. No doubt it has been odd. Even here, in the Pacific Northwest, where the lush lands of the Willamette Valley are known for its abundance, we have been stymied by the alternating hot, cold, wet and dry climate of the year. Folks needed to replant their spring gardens due to unseasonably cool and wet conditions. Seeds would not sprout, early transplants simply perished. And for those who took the bait and planted tomatoes in April (despite endless caution to do otherwise) well, not only did they need to go a second round but they are now, like their prudent friends who waited, facing off with an abundance of green orbs that will do little more than taunt us. Will they turn red? Maybe. But they will not develop that lovely sweetness a beefsteak tomato is known for. Nope. For that they need the full on summer sun. Oh well, I have a backlog of green tomato recipes for folks who are interested.

But it is not just my garden or regional weather that has me thinking. Surely the entire world has been facing off with the oddity of an unpredictable weather pattern. We can debate why that is happening but not that it is happening. And though I can shop the farmer?s markets should my own yield be less then expected, others cannot so simply ignore the consequences. Which makes the matter of growing food or, rather, staying true to the effort, ever more significant.

What I am speaking of is the conversations I have overheard from newly converted kitchen gardeners taking it on the chin. They have invested money, time, heart and soul to put in a vegetable garden and they are crest fallen by the results. They are considering the numbers. You know those pesky numbers -- time plus labor plus inputs divided by yield. We all know to stay away from those numbers, or at least I do if only because they bely the true costs of industrial farming. Still, we cannot entirely discount that conversation since they, the industrialist, will become increasingly more adept at promoting themselves as the solution to bad weather and sick soil. They, the industrial agriculturists for genetically modified seed, will make their case that the world needs them. They, and the nations who take their side, will continue their onslaught of land grabs and water privatization if only to save us from ourselves. What could we, the little people, the ?peasants? of the world, do to stand up to these conditions? In an effort and voice nothing less than condescending, or worse, entirely corrupt, they will convince themselves and the nations who take their side, that they are working for the sake of humanity. Which might be true if it wasn?t for the fact that it is, and has always been, the little people and ?peasants? of the world that has fed us.

There are statistic out there that suggest, correctly, that over 80% of the food we eat is grown but the peasantry and small gardeners of the world. Whether by barter, at community markets or for personal

consumption we, the little people, have done the job for centuries. If industrial agriculturists have manipulated us to think otherwise, it is high time we turn the page on that story. But (and here is the thing) we cannot get crest fallen or frustrated with the yield. We cannot run the numbers. We cannot go back to our modern, leisure-loving, consumer minds (even though I am quite sure they are waiting for us to do just that). We cannot look at the pretty pictures in the magazine or the ?farm to table? cookbooks making the rounds and wonder why our gardens and lives do not look like that. We might like to imagine ourselves out some lovely summer morning in a cute gardening dress and muck-a-lucks, holding a basket brimming with the hearty fruits of our labor, but it would be more honest to expect pant knees soiled with mud, our hair akimbo, our hands, nails and cuticles reminiscent of a wildebeest and our basket of glory filled with half-gnarled turnips, ragged greens and, well, green tomatoes. At least that?s what I, and my basket, look like and I?m proud of it. This, as they say, ain?t no disco. This is the life of a householder --part radical, part homespun, part salt-of-the-earth and part, as I mentioned, crazy. This is where the strength of our web comes in. We will need the strength to challenge their stories and, maybe, even some of our own; particularly the one that says it will be easy to grow our food and live this life. Oh, it may be just that on many days (and lord knows I would not live any other way) but it will also take work and constancy of will. That story should never be discounted.

But then we will have lots of time to share our stories. Now I must go to the garden. I have donned my overalls that, for some inexplicable reason, are actually clean today. I will add compost to some of my beds, plant some crimson clover and garlic cloves. The kale that I planted in Spring, now towering and sadly forsaken during the hot summer months, will be cut down today to make room for the recently planted transplants of the same that I hope will make it through the winter. Who knows? Like I said, its been an odd year of weather.

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