

Saving the Land

From John

When we were kicked off our land at the end of last season it didn't seem like it at the time but it created a very unique opportunity for us. As well as Gardens of Eagan (the farm I am the production manager for by day and whose land we continue to lease) when we moved to the new property late last season. I actually had the opportunity to spend a lot of time on the property last season. Gardens of Eagan closed on the property in the spring of 2012 and it was my job to start transitioning the land to certified organic production. I developed a rather intimate view of the land as I spent a great deal of time on it. It is a 110 tillable (so they say) acres that needs to be brought back into being biologically productive. The first step was taking a series of soil samples from the various soil types on the farm to create a basis on which to manage the soil fertility. I worked the farm once with the disc harrow before beginning to apply amendments to bring the soil back into balance. From what we could see from the soil tests and having spent some time working the farm was soil that desperately wanted to be productive, and has the capacity to be so but was woefully out of balance. The first thing that stuck out was the lack of life in the soil. When you work with organic soil for long enough you know when the soil microbes and other invertebrates are active in the soil and working hard for you. Primarily it's the smell. I am sure those of you who are gardeners and have spent years working compost into your garden soil know the exact smell I am talking about. There is a deep and rich scent that comes from biologically diverse and active soils. Some might say it's just the smell of bacteria farts. Which in part is true but unlike the stinky sulfury swamp smell of anaerobic (without the presence of oxygen), we try to create habitat for aerobic bacteria allowing for well aerated soil. Aerobic soils take on a much sweeter smell that tells you the soil life is thriving. On the new farm about 20 acres of the farm was previously in vegetables and the other 80 was in a corn and bean rotation (or a corn, corn, corn, bean, corn rotation as seems the trend now) and there were some striking differences between the two areas.

ON DECK

Next week you can expect chard, turnips, lettuce, arugula, basil. We have to check to other farm but we should have garlic scapes and at least some members will start seeing zucchini and summer squash.

The veggie ground was much more active biologically and thus had much better tilth however there was little to no weed control meaning that while the soil itself was in reasonably good shape it was immediately un-farmable due to the 10 or so weed species that had come to dominate the landscape. The corn and bean ground had not nearly as many weeds but the soil was dead. When you dug up a handful of earth, cupped your hands and brought it to your nose there was nothing, no discernable smell with the exception to the lower fields that were sour and pungent with the smell of anaerobic bacteria at work because this part of the farm is often wet and was clearly worked when wet time and time again. This smell is arguably worse than no smell at all because it means there is even more work to be done there. Now soil tests while incredibly valuable can be a bit deceiving if you don't understand what they are trying to tell you. First you need to realize that soil tests will vary wildly in the same season depending on conditions such as air and soil temperature, moisture level and the current crop in the ground. The best was to get around this is to always sample at the same time each year (which for us October is best) which helps to minimize some of the variability. The second thing to know is that how the test is being completed (different labs use different methods) because the method used will alter the results. If the soil sample is dissolved in a strong acid it will bring out every bit of potassium, calcium, phosphorus, sulfur and so on. Often creating numbers that appear great where as a test done where the sample is dissolved in water will often paint a comparatively bleaker picture. The catch is the difference between total nutrients in the soil and available nutrients in the soil. The available nutrients are what is really important because this tells you what the plant will actually be able to access. Because of soil imbalances and lack of biological activity, the crop will not be able to unlock and use much of what there is in the soil because the same strong acids used to extract the minerals in the acid test won't exist naturally

in the soil nor will the plants be able to produce it meaning that it is locked up and be inaccessible to the plant.

A friend of mine who is a specialty crop consultant was just visiting last week and told me about a farmer that says that he loves to transition conventional ground because it is almost always loaded with fertility and once you get the soil life jumpstarted it will start to release and make available all the latent fertility leading to high productivity. There is a lot of truth to that and it is rather encouraging.

It is apparent that I have used up all my space for this week's article so I hope this is a good primer and where to start transitioning abused soil. Next week I will continue on this thread and discuss more of what we found in the soil, what the weeds tell us about our soil and what we are doing to bring this piece of earth back to life!



Zucchini and Summer Squash are just around the corner!

News and Notes

- If you know that you will not be able to make a pickup or if you want to pick up at another location. Please give us 24 hours' notice so that we can plan accordingly!
- This week our volunteer members will find a sign-up sheet at each pickup site. You can find and sign up for a shift to come out to the farm or help out at the distribution site.
- We know you already know, but we appreciate your continued patience as the diversity of these early shares isn't quite what we usually expect. Hang in there, we are getting back on track!

Featured Item

Known by many names such as raab, rapa, rapine, rappi, rappone, fall and spring raab, turnip broccoli, taitcat, Italian or Chinese broccoli, broccoli rape, broccoli de rabe, Italian turnip, and turnip broccoli. We prefer to call this nutrient loaded green broccoli raab when cut young or rapini when more mature and showing its yellow blossoms. It contains a good dose of vitamin A and C and iron along with vitamin K thiamin, riboflavin, niacin, vitamin B6, folate, calcium, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, zinc and manganese. This super-food is great on pizza, served with kale, collards or any other cooking green but is best served on pasta (in our opinion). It should keep for 7-10 days in a produce bag in your crisper drawer.

Recipe of the Week

BROCCOLI RAAB WITH PARSLEY BUTTER

Ingredients

- 1 large bunch broccoli raab (rapini), thick stems trimmed
- 1/4 cup water
- 1/4 cup (about) parsley butter (recipe below)

Preparation

Combine broccoli raab and 1/4 cup water in large pot. Sprinkle with salt. Bring to simmer over medium-high heat. Cover and simmer until broccoli raab wilts, about 3 minutes. Uncover and simmer until broccoli raab is tender and water evaporates, about 4 minutes. Add parsley butter to pot and toss to coat. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Place in bowl and serve immediately

Parsley Butter Recipe

Ingredients

- 1 cup (packed) coarsely chopped fresh Italian parsley
- 2 teaspoons (packed) grated lemon peel
- 1 garlic clove, peeled
- 1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, room temperature

Preparation

Finely chop parsley, lemon peel, and garlic in processor. Add butter and process until well blended. Season parsley butter to taste with salt and pepper.

DO AHEAD Can be prepared 3 days ahead. Cover and refrigerate. Bring to room temperature before using.