



Right now the garden is a place to spend time doing rudimentary farming activities like hoeing and weeding—the kind of sweaty work that our mother would have approved of.



REAL FARMERS

An Acre to Herbs

By Thaddeus Barsotti

Before finalizing our farm's planting schedule last fall, I asked our CSA members for input. The request apparently brought out many a farmer in our customers, as we received many suggestions in response—suggestions that lead to some minor and other major modifications to our farm's planting schedules.

One such modification—a big one—was to start an herb garden. I received enough requests for sprigs of tarragon or a bunch of mint that I decided to plant an acre of mixed herbs. One member reminisced about shopping at markets in France and loving how vendors would give him fresh herb sprigs with each produce purchase. The idea stuck.

My brother Freeman and I made a selection of perennial herbs that we liked and thought would do well on our farm in Capay: rosemary, oregano, thyme, sage, tarragon, and mint. Before the winter rains started, we had the herb seeds and cuttings grown into transplants in our parents' greenhouse on the hill overlooking our farm. The land we chose for the herbs was in an old mixed-tree fruit orchard between the farmhouse and the office. The fruit trees were some of our parents' first plantings on their new farm in 1976. The fact that there were only a few of each type of tree in that amount of space is testament to the scale of agriculture that gave birth to our farm. As we made the decision to plant this area to herbs, I thought about how crazy my mother would have been to plant this many herbs when the farm was starting. And if she were still with us, she would think we were crazy for planting so many herbs. The fact remains that the little farm and CSA she started and left to her four sons, has grown into something much larger than she ever imagined.

Many of the trees in the old fruit orchard had already died, leaving large spaces of seasoned weeds. The remaining mixture of apricots, peaches, plums, and apples had served our farm well but their time had come—their productivity had lulled, and it was time to shift the objective of the soil at their feet. In one day's work, Ricardo and his crew rooted the old trees from the thick soil, disked the field once, ripped it 18 inches deep, disked it again, and then pulled up beds every 60 inches—the standard bed spacing for our farm.

The area looked much better. The ground that had been providing a living for the old fruit orchard had literally been turned upside-down—the top 18 inches anyway. A new life for the soil was set on course. Freeman and I briefly argued, as brothers do, about the positioning of the herbs. We spent every afternoon for a few days transplanting the little herb plants into the center of the beds. We then realized that if we were going to get the job done before the rain, we would need some help. Lala and Cuco were elected and in two more days, all the little plants had a home. The field was now neatly organized beds of dark soil, garnished

with new herb plants spaced every eighteen inches.

The herb garden was completed last fall, and some concern about how the new plants would handle the cold, wet, winter loomed in the back of my mind. The rains completely saturated the soil and the cold nights left ice on the little plants. As the plants settled into their new home, the weed seeds that were scattered throughout the soil, germinated and grew into neighbors. The field became green with young grasses, making the new little herb plants difficult to spot.

One member reminisced about shopping at markets in France and loving how vendors would give him fresh herb sprigs with each produce purchase.

Last week, the soil was finally dry enough that we could start the process of creating a healthy environment for the herbs to thrive. Freeman and I again made the garden our afternoon project; we hoed the weeds on the top of the bed, getting as close to the little plants as comfortable, and then used our fingers to remove the weeds that found refuge closer to the herbs. The two beds we finished now have a twelve-inch strip of soil that is, once again, only soil, herbs, and invisible weed seeds. The edges and bottoms of the beds are still green with grass, but soon the soil will be dry enough for the tractor to cultivate the remainder of the weeds. And shortly after that, the weeds will be ready to be hoed again—this is organic farming. Eventually, the little herb plants will become little herb bushes and will be ready for harvesting. Between now and then, we will install an irrigation system and weed the plants several times more.

Doing away with the old fruit trees was a bittersweet process. That small orchard was a fixture of our childhood and was the home to my favorite white peach tree—a tree that I still think about when reminiscing about childhood days. Now that spot is home to a new herb garden, and soon the little piece of land will make new memories with new people. Right now the garden is a place to spend time doing rudimentary farming activities like hoeing and weeding—the kind of sweaty work that our mother would have approved of.