

On Being a Farm Wife

(and other hazards)

Joyce Bupp



The air hangs heavy on this humid, sticky day.

"So thick you could almost cut it with a knife," was how my mother used to describe such hazy, stagnant air. A midday mistiness shrouds the meadow,

casting a bluish tinge over the leafy green fencerows and woodlots, suggesting that fog rolling in is imminent.

Ominous, steely-gray clouds pile up on the horizon. Thunderstorms could wash out and freshen the air. Or, they might just stir the pot of heat and humidity, pouring in still more moisture to intensify this cauldron of steaminess.

Predictable.

Because it's mid-August.

Hanging in the air, equally as thick as the moisture droplets causing the August midday mist, is a tantalizing perfume beloved by farmers. It's a scent heavy with promise, laden with potential in the form of delicate silky strands and minute bits of plant reproductive matter.

The corn is pollinating.

While we humans wilt in the oppressive overbearing humidity, corn plants thrive on summer sultriness and plentiful showers. Corn is a tropical plant, happily thriving in a moist, mid-80 degree environment. Plus, the haziness in the air probably helps somewhat to limit the sun's baking tendency, which can overheat and kill a corn plant's sensitive pollination mechanisms.

After an incredibly poor wheat crop, afflicted with fungus and diseases from prolonged moisture, and battling many-times-rinsed hay harvests, farmers relish the aroma of pollinating corn. It offers the promise of tall, thick stalks bearing ears of golden kernels to replenish bags, bins and bunkers, to feed livestock, to generate some return on pouring into the soil thousands of dollars worth of seed and fertilizers.

Only for these few brief August days does this corny fragrance float its enticement in the humid air. But as the scent drifts from the fields in through the kitchen windows, it blends with others marking these fleeting few weeks of fading summer.

A cantaloupe on the counter drifts a light,

fruity aroma onto a welcome puff of breeze skipping through the screens. The melon's signature scent, coupled with a golden undercolor beneath its webbed skin, promises tasty ripeness in its tender flesh. While we've enjoyed

melons all summer from the markets, nothing quite matches the flavor of a sweet, ripe melon plucked right from the vine and served lightly chilled.

Peaches are equally delicious, their luscious fragrance freshening the seasonal mildew dampness of the basement. Picked and purchased just slightly underripe, they finish reaching full flavor and tenderness laid out in a single layer in a shallow cardboard box and blanketed with newspaper. The aroma reminds me to check them every day and serve them up — in various ways — at peak taste.

Or just enjoy one eaten out of hand, yellow-orange juice dripping from one's chin.

While their scent is far more subtle, tomatoes

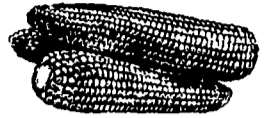
command almost as much affection here as do the sweet fruits of August. Foliage of tomatoes are another August scent, not floral, not unpleasant, but definitely distinctive. And, even if you're not a green thumb gardener, picking tomatoes will give you one, at least until you wash the greenish stem stains away with a good, strong soap.

While not a fruit, the lusciousness of fresh sweet corn, plucked from the stalks and husked while a kettle of water is heating to boiling on the stove, is the epitome of seasonal culinary offerings. And the epicurean treats of August are so simple and basic steaming ears of sweet corn

served a half-hour from the stalk, sunny slices of peaches oozing juice in a dish of cream, tender-crisp melon balls piled into a pretty dish for dessert. And ripe tomatoes. Finally.

And none of these would be as locally-grown-delicious without the steamy, sultry, stuffy days it takes to develop their full flavor and taste appeal.

Accepting that helps to make this sweat-soaked season a bit more appealing.



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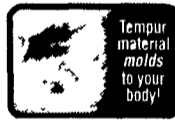
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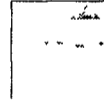
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