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# THE ROADSIDE DIARIES

## PLANNING FOR WINTER

*At the Halsey Farm, the harvest doesn't end  
after Labor Day.*

BY BRIAN HALWEIL

WATER MILL—When one of his ancestors first took possession of this spread near the intersection of Deerfield and Head of Pond Roads in 1747, much of the land was divided into five-acre parcels by hedgerows. The small parcels housed dozens of different crops, including wheat, corn and hay. The privet or other fences kept livestock from roaming into the veggies or a neighbor's patch.

It was a form of “mixed-farming” that was necessary to supply the alimentary needs of a family, not to mention the local community, centuries before the wonders of long-distance transport. (In fact, one of the farm's biggest markets was supplying wheat, meat, and potatoes to the fleet of whaling ships in Sag Harbor.)

This was long before the Long Island Rail Road pushed the region to cover the landscape with potatoes for export to New York City, Philadelphia and Boston, a pretty good living that provoked a type of agricultural boom from the turn of the century until about the 1950s.

“When I went to college in 1957, I figured I was going to be a potato farmer the rest of my life,” said Halsey as he sought the shade of a champion oak tree to take a break from juggling irrigation pumps on a sweltering day in early August. “By 1961, when I came home, the development boom had started and was putting pressure on the industry.” Land that could yield \$100 of potatoes was being sold for

\$25,000, a ratio that multiplied every year. Farmers began to sell or move. But the Halseys seemed to have farming in their bones: Tom's son Adam will be the 12th generation of Halsey's to farm this land. “I decided I wanted to stay here and change what I was doing,” Tom said.

His brother John had gone into dairying and then became an appleman, but it was another historical throwback that ultimately inspired Tom. “Tom liked the idea of having his wife at home,” said Dot, a school teacher before the two, who first met in kindergarten, were married. “To keep busy I bought lots of flowers and Tom realized how much they cost. So we started growing our own.”

That, in a nutshell, was the business model. Tom and Dot, who met in kindergarten and have been together ever since, built their first greenhouse, an 8-by-10 plastic structure. A glass structure followed in 1986. “These are some of the best agricultural soils,” said Tom, “but also the best landscape for recreation. These two mesh to a certain extent. The same people buying flowers might also be buying the vegetables. If we could grow potatoes, we could grow tomatoes.”

Today, the farm has three acres of greenhouses, including two acres for flowers and herbs to sell and one acre of seedlings to feed the farm's 75 growing acres. The Halsey farmstand sits just a few hundred feet from the gleaming Holly Hill Nursery greenhouse. Despite the proximity, some customers seem to wear blinders. “One woman who had been buying flowers for years once asked me if I knew where she could buy sweet corn,” Dot recalled. “I said, ‘Yes, yes, I know a place.’”

The farm continues to evolve. Tom and Dot found a willing successor in Adam, who, according to Dot, “wanted to be a farmer since almost forever” and “liked being in the tractor from the time he was in diapers.” When he reluctantly went to college, he chose a small school in the middle of Pennsylvania farm country, where he could take his truck and work at nearby farms. Adam and his wife, Beth, recently moved a 210-year-old farmhouse on the property away from the bustling road and renovated it. Beth keeps the farm's books and plants most of the seeds in the greenhouse.

Adam recently planted a row of privet around the corner of the family's farm, an attempt to not just hide the lines of cars that snarl the view on a busy weekend, but also to disguise the deer fence that the farm will be erecting. “I don't think anyone thinks deer fences are pretty,” said Adam. “But an 8-foot woven wire fence is really the only solution.” There are practical concerns, too, since fences take up precious land and add time to farmwork when the fences have to be temporarily removed to make room for equipment. The Halsey's flower business has noticeably slumped as the ubiquitous grazers frustrate the hobby



of gardeners.

But the veggie business remains strong. Tom estimates that the farm has as much of a diversity of crops today as his ancestors planted in the 1700s. The motivation isn't so much self-sufficiency as the possibility of bringing in customers for more of the season.

"I always feel badly because people think that when you get to Labor Day and shortly thereafter, it's over," said Dot. "And it's far from over. We have corn oftentimes all the way to October. All the root crops go up to the frost and after frost."

Tom jumped in, noting that the farm plants 15 acres of winter crops: "We keep three employees busy picking crops and stocking the stand through Thanksgiving and sometimes later."

"There are turnips," said Dot, "even lettuce and kale after the frost. There's a whole lot."

Tom: "Carrots and beets and four or five kinds of potatoes. We sell

## RECIPE

### GRAMMA HALSEY'S PUMPKIN PIE

by Dorothy Halsey, Halsey Farm & Nursery, Water Mill

2 c. cooked winter squash	1 1/3 T. flour
2/3 c. white sugar	3 eggs beaten
2/3 c. brown sugar, packed	1 1/3 c. milk
1 1/3 tsp. cinnamon	1/4 t. each, nutmeg, cloves
1 t. ginger	and allspice
2/3 t. salt	

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Combine ingredients in large bowl. Mix thoroughly. Pour mixture into unbaked pie shell. Bake one hour in 400-degree oven. Makes 1 large or 2 small pies. Pie is cooked when knife inserted in the center comes out clean.

Winter squash can be Sunshine, Blue Hubbard or Butternut. Wash squash, prick top and side many times with a fork. To cook, place on a foil-lined pan in a 350-degree oven. Cooking time varies depending on size of the squash; usually about an hour. It should be fork tender when done. Cool and cut baked squash into sections. Remove seeds and skin. Put flesh in food mill. Can be used for pie, soup, casserole or frozen for winter use.

some in larger packages for people who want to store them."

Dot: "Winter squash and parsnips."

Tom (about the parsnips): "They're really the best though after the frost."

In early August, most of the winter crops that will fill this place are just beginning to fill out. The dusty green cabbage leaves are stretching towards their neighbors although there is no sign of cabbages. The Long Island cheese pumpkins are sprawling plants with acorn-size fruit that are a mini-version of the basketball-size curcubits that will be harvested in a couple of months.

The farm grows four or five varieties of winter squash—including Long Island Cheese, Acorn, Butternut, and Sunshine (a small, bright orange Kabocha that is Dot's favorite)—an ideal survival crop for Long Island's long fall and typically mild winters. Since cutting a large squash can be a challenge, Dot suggests piercing and putting the whole thing in the oven for an hour or so to soften them before cutting and then baking in pieces. "It preserves the flavor because they're not in their own

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water," she said. She's never made a pumpkin pie or pumpkin soup with pumpkin, considering squash superior for most recipes.

"We definitely get enjoyment out of knowing that our product will be on lots of Thanksgiving tables," said Adam. "And Christmas tables and well into the New Year."

After turkey day, the stand becomes self-serve, a sort of communal root cellar. Without the bustle and hum of other customers and the attention of the proprietor, a visit becomes more like a trip to an art gallery than a grocery. (And not just because of the four shades of cauliflower—white, purple, green, and orange—arranged like pastels.)

With the door shut behind you, the silence and shelter from the wind invite a meditative assessment of the offerings. No rush. No distractions. Just the goods and the shopper, planning meals for the next few nights, and perhaps the next few weeks.

The setting lends itself to overbuying, since each return trip reveals less selection and slightly shabbier produce that has been out of the ground longer. Through the farmstand's windows, the snow on the fields, frost on the road, and sinking noontime sun hint at the mortal nature of this pleasure.

On a trip there last winter, I spent about \$27, walking away with six full bags, in addition to a five-pound bag of potatoes. Something didn't feel right. So I put a few extra bucks in the box and got a 10-pound bag instead. □

**WHAT:** Halsey Farmstand and Holly Hill Nursery

**WHERE:** Corner of Deerfield Rd. and Head of Pond Rd., Water Mill, 726-4843

**WHEN:** Daily, 8 a.m.-6 p.m., until Thanksgiving. Self-serve until January 1. Nursery opens April 1.

**CANT MISS:** Winter squash, potatoes, cauliflower