

AJO COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE



Summer 2010 / Week 6 of 13

Editor: Nina Altshul

Planned harvest: Tomatoes (double share), Okra, Black-Eyed Peas, Melon, Honeydew, Basil, Farmer's Choice

Food Bank

The Ajo Food Bank is one of the rare branches of the Tucson Community Food Bank that for many reasons cannot offer fresh produce to their clients as a regular part of their food boxes (even though they would like to! and they used to about 4 years ago). Several months ago, Ajo CSA started donating extra produce left over after the pickup and the farm stand, however, there was a need for much more fresh produce. So I talked to Frank Martin of Crooked Sky Farms, and he graciously agreed to donate a bigger amount specifically to the food bank at the beginning of each month (actually, as much as we can transport – do you know anybody with a big truck?!?!?). So this past Wednesday, Ajo CSA brought back about 800 lbs of food (squash, tomatoes, potatoes, onions).



Marilee and Betty at the Food Bank demo

Thanks to Peter for doing the run and loading and unloading, as well as Adrian Vega and Pilar Hanson for helping unload in Ajo.

On Thursday, working in my capacity as part of the U of A Pima County Cooperative Extension, I organized a food demo in order to show the food bank clients how to incorporate fresh produce they were receiving with the regular food box items and prepare an easy, tasty and nutritious meal for themselves and their families. Marilee Williams and Betty Russell, U of A Extension volunteers, designed and cooked delicious recipes with squash and plums, and served about 90 people, including the AzYP Kids Next Door summer program. These food demos will, I hope, become a regular monthly event at the food bank as part of the Extension's commitment to Ajo and working with the low-income population.

Ajo CSA Community Foundation Grant

As you might now, the International Sonoran Desert Alliance (ISDA) recently won a small planning grant from the Community Foundation for Southern Arizona in order to bring together community partners participating in food projects, and for the next 6 weeks we will be actively communicating our visions for future projects. After this period, a proposal for an implementation grant will be written. Months ago, when the process started, the total implementation grant amount was estimated at \$20, 000. After the successful interviews, the Foundation is now looking into substantially expanding that amount to as high as \$100,000 for this year, and potentially awarding about the same amount for at least another year. We are currently looking for proposals for future projects, so I would like to invite you, Ajo CSA members and friends, to share your thoughts on our food system and the visions for Ajo CSA's future role in it.

For over two years, Ajo CSA has been an active leader in education and promotion of a local sustainable and just food system in Ajo and southern Arizona through newsletters, events (ranging from the gardening workshops to food demonstrations), as well as the participation of Farmer Frank and CSA members in the development of the Ajo Community Garden, Ajo Unified School District garden and WIC garden, through both expertise and donations of time and materials like compost, seedlings etc., and Ajo CSA's donations of leftover produce from the pickup and farm stand to the Ajo Food Bank (see above).

In the grant planning period, the community partners will be proposing and then selecting the projects to cooperate on, and I would like to represent CSA's vision to the widest extent possible. So please take a moment to consider: what do you think needs to be accomplished in Ajo with regard to food? What do you think our biggest problems/issues/obstacles are? How do you think CSA should be involved? What kind of future do you

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see for the Ajo CSA? Can you think of a specific project we should undertake? Would you be willing to commit yourself to any of it (like your time or expertise)?

I'm looking forward to hearing what you are thinking! Please feel free to email me, call me or talk to me in person – and please don't be afraid to think big – now is the time to do so!

Watermelons

You know it is summer in Arizona when melons and watermelons are abundant – and abundant they are on Frank's fields! The farm crew has been harvesting up to 1,400 lbs a day, so get ready for more of these tasty cool treats! The watermelon we were receiving for the past two weeks is called an Allsweet. The Allsweet Watermelon is a development of Charles V. Hall of the Kansas Agricultural Experimental Station and arose by crossing together the varieties Miles, Peacock and Charleston Gray. The Allsweet Watermelon was introduced in 1972. Allsweet Watermelons feature a very long oval shape nearing 25 pounds each with irregular striped markings and a tough rind, and are similar to Crimson Sweet in their quality. The flesh is firm and very sweet, and Frank says that the general rule with the sweetness of the watermelon is that the more seeds a watermelon has, the sweeter it is. But here's another reason why Frank grows these beauties: the Allsweet acts as a pollinator watermelon. Some of the newer, hybrid varieties with yellow and orange flesh as well as seedless (or virtually seedless) varieties need help with the pollinating. Allsweet's pollen transfers really well, and as he grows them in the field among the others, vines crawling and interweaving so he can't even tell the species apart, the bees transfer the pollen among the flowers and plants, including to the watermelons that need pollination. So when you cut into your watermelon the next time, we are not sure what color it will be; but we are sure it is going to be sweet! Enjoy!

Preserving the Summer Bounty

A few weeks ago I attended a Food Preservation Workshop at the U of A Pima County Extension, led by Linda Block and the fabulous Cheralyn, and have had a canning bug ever since! With all that bounty in my CSA share and the garden, what better than capture some of the sun for the winter? My big project this week is tomatoes – Romas, yellow tomatoes, Green Zebras, a variety of sizes and shapes, all waiting to be put away. I started with the simplest method of all – roasting. But first, as with any preservation method, make sure you have enough room to process the food; clear out your kitchen counters and sinks, put aside your equipment and leave out only what you will need for this project. Also, try to keep your surfaces as clean as you can in order to ensure maximum food safety standards. Kids (and husbands) are of course welcome. Then, first comes the washing – wash the tomatoes in several waters and let dry. From here on decide what you want to do. For roasting the tomatoes, slice them in half (Romas) or quarters (round varieties), no peeling or de-seeding needed. Mix them with a drizzle of good olive oil, salt and pepper in a big bowl, than arrange on baking trays, making sure the tomatoes are not too crowded but can be touching as they will shrink. (A little tip for easier clean-up: line the trays with parchment paper.) There are several methods of slow-roasting, usually finding a balance between temperature and roasting time. What you are looking for are just slightly roasted tomatoes, still meaty but with caramelized sweetness, just lightly charred, if at all. The combination of temperature and time that works the best for me is 250 °F and about 3-4 hours in the oven. Make sure you keep on checking on the tomatoes, since they go from yummy to charred in a hurry (I actually lost several batches in my experimentation!). When roasted, let cool, and then decide what you want to do with them. The tomatoes are delicious as they are – Cheralyn served them chopped on top of a toasted and buttered bread slice with a bit of ricotta; try adding them to omelets or pizzas or blending them into hummus or bean dip. You can also blend a bigger batch and make a great sauce. If you manage to keep some, you can freeze them: use freezer-type zip-lock bags, and before closing the bag try to suck the air out using a little straw. The tomatoes will freeze faster if you arrange them flat in a bag, as opposed to a big bundle on the bottom of the bag. This way also allow for easier breaking off of what you need. If you freeze all your produce that way, you will also make it easier to stack bags in your freezer. Make sure you mark the content and date on the freezer bags.

Next week: tomato canning!