

Seeds of Change

February always feels like the longest month and 2021 has reinforced that conviction. Snow, cold, and ice are not the only things keeping us close to home. My brother is texting pictures of Florida sunsets and days on the beach to remind me of the winter of 2020 when we, too, were feeling the warm sand between our toes. While “the plague” was just a rumor last winter, this year it is all too real on Virgil Mountain.

February’s saving grace, for me, is planting onion seeds in flats in preparation for the warmer weather. The seeds are tiny and hundreds of them are carefully nestled into soil, watered, and kept in a warm place until the first straight, green shoots unfold their way into the light. Every 2 weeks, my trusty calendar indicates what seeds need to be started from lettuce and kale to broccoli and herbs and onto peppers and tomatoes, they all have their particular requirements. By the end of May, there will be hundreds of transplants to tuck into the soil of the summer garden.

We grow more than we can eat. I grow a huge garden to feed my neighbors who patronize the Virgil Farmer’s Market. In February, March, and April of 2020, I proceeded as if we would open as usual, but it became increasingly apparent that Covid 19 could jam up the works. What were other farmer’s markets planning to do? Through the wonders of Zoom, I joined a group of Farmer’s Market managers to explore NY State regulations concerning farmer’s markets and the if and how of opening them safely. Some markets decided to be online only. Other had to find larger locations to accommodate social distancing. There were new requirements for mask wearing, hand sanitizer, and packaging food. Customers would not be allowed to congregate and converse with one another, to stand next to the vendor’s table, or to handle the merchandise. Signage and barriers had to be configured into the design.

Four of our vendors are of an age to be high risk. Would it even be safe to interact with the public? After much consideration, we decided to open with the new protocols. We knew that it would not be the same and that we would all miss the social interactions that make farmer’s markets so special. We also knew that everyone was hungry for fresh, local foods after a long winter of shortages and that shopping in the open air would feel much safer than scary supermarkets.

We were right. We had all been cooped up so long that just seeing friend’s faces was a welcome relief. The vast majority of our customers were very respectful of the safety protocols. We were shocked when one young man, a long time customer, refused to wear a mask and expounded on the Covid hoax. We made it clear that we were very sorry that he was excluding himself from attending the market again. Sure, the masks were uncomfortable in the summer heat, but this simple measure was protecting both the vendors and the customers. Sharing fresh, healthy food with our friends and neighbors made it all worthwhile.

And here we are again in the time of planting seeds. Who could have imagined that we would still be plagued and isolated this year? But as I fish tiny seeds from their packets and lovingly tuck them into their nursery flats, I know that these beautiful vegetables will find a good home in the time of Covid.

Chris Applegate