



Diary of a Class: Fall Vegetable Gardening

On this trip we learned about growing a fall vegetable garden. But, more than just produce is cultivated during a week at the John C. Campbell Folk School.

By Karen Keb Acevedo

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As I maneuvered the twists and turns of highway 68 on my way from Lexington, Ky., to Brasstown, N.C., I was full of anticipation for what a week at the John C. Campbell Folk School had in store for me.

The late summer weather was hot and humid, and the vegetation all around me was winding down for the season. These were the perfect conditions under which to begin thinking about fall vegetable gardening. Read Karen's [Fall Vegetable Garden To-Do List](#)>>

Monday: Lay of the Land

The first full day of my class dawned and I was up early to Morningsong (a gathering to begin each day with music, singing and history) with Jan Davidson, the Folk School's director, to hear him weave the history of the school in true Appalachian fashion.

Amidst his humorous anecdotes and skilled storytelling technique, I heard loud and clear his message about the Folk School: Its mission is to teach students the traditional crafts of Appalachia in a truly noncompetitive and supportive environment.

It set the tone for the week and put me on a determined path.

After a hearty breakfast of oatmeal, fruit and juice, I walked over to the cooking studio at Davidson Hall, where our class was based for the week.

Late August in western North Carolina is beautiful to see, but miserable to feel: sweltering heat and high humidity. It was a relief to have an air-conditioned room to escape to throughout the day.

Our instructor, Frances Juhlin, an organic market gardener in nearby Murphy, N.C., began by giving us an overview of the week and what we could expect to get out of the class.

I wanted to learn about gardening through the fall and even winter, if possible, to increase my self-sufficiency, so I was thrilled to know that by the end of the week, I would be able to add this knowledge to my repertoire.

All eight members of the class headed up the steep hill behind Davidson to the Folk School's greenhouse, where we were given our supplies for the week—two APS trays (Advanced Planting System trays, available from Gardener's Supply; 888-833-1412;) and a few recycled pots for transplanting.

Juhlin instructed the class on good technique for mixing soil and we set out to sow seeds of Asian greens, lettuces, arugula and cilantro—all fast germinators so the class could have instant gratification!

After watering our trays with our recycled dish-soap bottles (a tip from Juhlin's mother) to avoid disrupting the newly



planted seeds, we perused the school's garden beds and learned a little about pest damage and organic controls.

After a refreshing summer lunch of Cobb salad and chocolate ice cream, we reconvened in the air-conditioned cooking studio to discuss fall and winter plant varieties and growing tips.

Juhlin supplied us each with a stack of the best organic seed catalogs so we could determine what we wanted to plant when we returned home.

We were able to ask her advice on varieties, organic techniques and supplies. We returned to the greenhouse for a final watering of our seeds and adjourned for the day.

I enjoyed a little downtime between class and dinner with a short power nap!

The dining hall was packed that evening as excited students discussed their first day of classes. Vegetable lasagna, salad (made of produce from the Folk School's garden) and the legendary olive bread (a student favorite) were served.

Sidenote: The Folk School serves delicious food, but if you have specific dietary needs (vegetarian, low fat, gluten-free, low salt, etc.), there are special preparations just for you, as well as a lovely salad bar available at every meal. You'll never walk away from the dining hall hungry or unsatisfied!

I enjoyed meeting people from all over the country, of all ages, with whom I had at least one thing in common: a love for learning and craft. This commonality is what really bonds students for the week and the camaraderie is palpable.

Evening activities vary throughout the week, but Monday was special—folklore and folk music in Keith House with Anne Lough on the dulcimer (mountain and hammered) and autoharp.

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Dig In

To see the variety of classes available at the John C. Campbell Folk School, visit them at www.folkschool.org

Lough's music and stories were far more entertaining than anything on television; it made me long for the days of families sitting around the fire, telling stories and enjoying the peacefulness of it all.

Afterward, as I walked back to my room at the Log House over the lighted footpaths, I took a few moments to listen and reflect. As the crickets chirped their summer song and the crisp mountain air filled my lungs, I was happy.

Tuesday: Getting Our Hands Dirty

Today was the day to dig in and get planting—transplanting that is. Juhlin had started a good number of seeds in the previous weeks for us to plant into the Folk School's garden, so they were now ready to go into the ground.

We began with a short lesson on rototilling with groundskeeper Tom Doornbos, then we split into several groups assigned to different garden beds.

We transplanted collards, fennel and Asian greens, and direct-sowed spinach and arugula. After a thorough and careful watering, we mulched the transplants with straw.

Though transplanting during the heat of the day is not advised, Juhlin acknowledged that we had no other choice that week and moved forward with the task at hand.

Juhlin instructed us on the use of floating row covers—the key to fall gardening—and we covered the freshly seeded spinach and arugula beds, and secured them with large pins.

That evening, another special treat was in store: live music and contra dancing in Keith House with Bob Dalsemer. This modern form of a centuries-old dance tradition involves groups of couples in two long lines.

I've since learned that every Tuesday is Contra Dance night at the school and the local folks are invited to participate, increasing the number of available dance partners and making for a nice community event.

Wednesday: Survive the Heat



On this hump day, I decided I was sufficiently rested to go on the morning bird and flower walk at 7:15 with naturalists Bill and Janice Bolte.

During the misty morning, we walked over the paths that surround the school and observed various plants and birds, pointed out by the Boltes.

After Morningsong and breakfast, I headed over to the greenhouse to begin another day in the Folk School garden. More transplanting was on the agenda, so we split up into groups and put the broccoli, collards and frisée into the freshly cultivated beds. Careful watering and mulching finished off the morning.

After lunch, we headed out into the garden once again to learn a bit about heirloom tomatoes and the varieties growing there. We were invited to pick sun-ripened fruits off the vine and taste them right there—what a delight!

At that point, we had all had enough heat for the day so we headed back to our cool kitchen to discuss greenhouses.

That evening's activity was an entertaining blacksmithing demonstration at the Whitaker Blacksmith Studio by instructor Greg Price.

Thursday: Field Trip

On this day, we traveled to Candy Mountain Farm, the home farm of our instructor and her husband, Stephen, in Murphy, N.C., about 30 minutes away by car.

We toured the luscious, green fields and spied all the organic crops being produced for the area's farmers' market. Frances and Stephen shared lots of tips for growing particular crops, like unblanched celery and greenhouse tomatoes, and discussed the merits of farming organically and sustainably on a small-scale (about two acres are planted in crops at Candy Mountain).

Their Blue Heeler, Kino, raced around the farm, fetching various toys as those of us with able bodies picked mustard greens, telling stories "like old sharecroppers," we joked.

The Juhlins prepared a nice lunch for us on their deck and we relaxed after the day's work was done.

Back at the Folk School, the evening's activity was original readings by the storytelling class.

Friday: Berry Good Time

For our last day of class, we headed out for another field trip to nearby Karen Hurtubise's raspberry farm, where she talked to us about the basics of backyard berry growing.

We learned that it's not as easy as it looks and, despite all your preparations and good practices, sometimes the crop doesn't materialize. At this point, that's one thing we all understood!

The last day of Folk School classes always ends with the Student Exhibit.

As a gardening class, we were a little stumped by what to "exhibit." We had trays with miniscule seedlings popped up, plastic pots with arugula and cilantro sprouts, and a whole lot of dirty, sweaty clothes and gloves—nothing all that lovely or exhibit-worthy!

We threw together some vegetable dolls and some fresh pickings from the garden, and called it a week.

It was inspiring to see all the quality work that was done by my fellow students that week—baskets, enameled jewelry, quilts, fine wooden tables, wood carvings, hand-forged gates and concrete works of art.

The week culminated with a concert in the festival barn by a band called "Old Enough to Know Better." Their songs were described as "folk, doo-wop, Chinese pop songs and more"—eclectic, but dead-on for the setting.

It was the perfect way to wind down from the week, reminisce with newfound friends, and exchange numbers and addresses ... and promises to keep in touch.

Saturday: Homebound



After one last hearty breakfast in the dining hall, lingering for as long as possible and not wanting the experience to end, I said my final goodbyes and hit the road for home.

I had five hours to mull over the week and think about the good times and all I had learned. I couldn't wait to get home, go online and begin planning my fall veggie garden for the first time.

I felt that I had just upped my self sufficiency and I knew that not a fall would pass again without a little something planted in the garden.

About the Author Karen Keb Acevedo is the editor in chief of Hobby Farms, Hobby Farm Home and the Popular Farming Series, based in Lexington, Ky.