September 2011

The Last Page: The Miracle of Zucchini

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol100/iss3/11
The Miracle of Zucchini

When I came back to the Colby garden after a few weeks of leave, I entered a Jurassic jungle. The newly emerging seedlings that I left in late June had grown dense, voracious, and eloquent in their dominion over our three-quarter-acre plot atop Runnals Hill.

The zucchini plants were the most impressive. Our wimpy transplants had matured into monstrous Chimeras with leaves the size of my head and thick hollow stems that bore sharp prickles. As I stepped into the waist-high tangle of cucurbit vines to inspect these strange plants, I was transported to prehistoric times. I expected to see small dinosaurs running around my ankles bellowing at each other under the canopy of dense leaves. I carefully pulled aside a long stem that pierced my leg and spotted a small zucchini protruding from the base of the plant with a graceful yellow flower growing out of the top of it. I was astounded. This is where a zucchini comes from?

There is something truly beautiful and stunning about witnessing the birth of a vegetable. Working in the Colby organic garden this summer yielded many surprises, but I was most surprised by my own naïveté about the food I eat. I never knew that a lettuce plant bleeds a white, bitter milk when you harvest it. I never knew an asparagus poking its head out from the mulch, ready to be eaten before it branches into a stout tree. I learned all these things after many hours of brandishing the hoe and the shovel, encountering peace with the tranquility of physical labor.

I go to work every morning by way of a path through the woods, out into a field of wildflowers and over to a plot of thriving veggies. Waterville lies below, tucked away beneath the rural expanse. Here I am in the most picturesque spot on Colby’s campus. The heat and the rain can be brutal, but on most days I love it either way, knowing that this weather is what makes the garden strong and, of course, builds character.

At the end of a workday my body feels content and tired, and my mind becomes invigorated. I’ve found that while hours of studying or office work are energizing for the mind and body, weeding, digging, and picking beans on my hands and knees has been... well, energizing. The previous summer I had a six-week office internship in the U.S. Senate, where I got especially good at alphabetizing documents and playing games online for hours on end. In fact, the most important result of my internship has been that I can include a prestigious description of Senate service on my résumé, not that I specialized in lethargy after working 40 hours a week indoors. Although there were positive aspects to the experience, I have also decided I will not be working in politics.

It is disappointing that college students are expected to focus on office work and résumé-building rather than on self-enrichment, because I grew exponentially more by farming this summer than I did last summer working for a senator. Our annual summer vacations end after we graduate, and yet at the beginning of each summer we rush to lock ourselves up indoors behind a desk instead of tapping that dynamic physical energy and creative potential that still makes us “kids.”

Maybe this new fever for desk internships is a bit overprescribed. I believe it is more rewarding to pause before entering the professional world and understand how a zucchini grows or to see an asparagus plant erupt from the ground. Late in the summer my gardening partner (and collaborator on this essay) Nina Hatch ’13 and I harvested over 100 pounds of produce in one single morning, and, damn, we were proud of ourselves. We brought out the pushcart, loaded up our cars, and brought a portion of it over to the Waterville homeless shelter and another portion to the Colby dining hall. We were greeted with enthusiasm and accolades at both venues. At the end of each day, we are both always smiling.

This has been the perfect, last summer.

Julie Kafka ’12, of Newton, Mass., is a global studies major with minors in environmental studies and geology.