Still life with winter squash: Notes from the farm

by Terra Brockman in the February 3, 2016 issue

Photo by Terra Brockman

It landed on my limestone patio—a warty, weighty, blue-gray, round-bellied, pointy-ended battleship that was more mineral than animal or vegetable.

But vegetable it was: a bulky Blue Hubbard squash from an organic farmer friend. It was a gift, he explained, for the simple reason that no one at the farmers market would buy such a monster.

This was in early November, and it lay where it landed, as each day brought a later sunrise and an earlier sunset. With fewer hours of daylight, we used each minute to the full, working in the fields to get the last greens harvested, the last root crops dug.

After Thanksgiving the weather often resembled my Blue Hubbard squash—heavy, gray, sometimes draped with icy fog. Both seemed to miss the light and warmth, and with good reason. Light is fundamental to all living things on earth—animal and vegetable.

On the farm the changes brought on by day length are seen most clearly in our hens, whose egg production declines precipitously in tandem with the sunlight. Although chickens have been domesticated for thousands of years, they still harbor genes from their ancestors, who like all wild birds lay eggs only in the spring so that they can raise their young in the warmth of summer. Although our hens lay an egg a day during the summer, we're lucky to get an egg every four or five days in the winter.

Many plants also have day-length triggers, mostly determining when they grow vegetatively and when they flower and set fruit. Through photosynthesis, water in the soil and carbon dioxide in the air combine to form carbohydrate molecules that make up the plant's leaves, stems, roots, and fruits. Long hours of sunshine put chloroplasts into overdrive, and plants grow fast and furious.

As the days shorten, there is less solar energy; vegetative growth slows, and plants put their energy into flowers and maturing fruits—tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, and more. Some vegetables, such as a head of cauliflower (a mass of tightly packed flower buds), form only when the days get shorter. With only a few hours of daylight, some plants—basil, for example—stop growing entirely, even if they are inside a tropical greenhouse.

Although the term *day length* is used to talk about these effects on plants, it's a misnomer. Researchers have found that it's not the hours of daylight but the length of the dark periods that controls plant growth. If you interrupt a long dark period with even short bursts of light, most plants will grow as they would during the long days and short nights of summer. Understanding the importance of dark periods is important—and not just for gardeners and farmers.

Long nights provide time to rest and restore. Many animals conserve their energy by sleeping away the long nights in their warm burrows. The field that produced all our vegetables the past two years is now entering a fallow period when it will rest and regenerate for two years. My brother is just back from his own fallow year, a sabbatical in Japan. The sun itself appears to pause and take a break (*sol* + *stice*, "sun standing still") before the days lengthen again. And I am using this dark velvet time to hunker down, to read, sleep, think, and walk.

When I go down to the fields to pick the remains of the kale and parsley—frost-damaged but also frost-sweetened—I am struck by the stillness, the absence of activity. I pass the brittle remains of tomato vines and pepper bushes, the mounds of earth that yielded potatoes, carrots, beets, and turnips. But as I too become quiet and still, the absence reveals powerful presences.

A flock of geese pass high overhead in an uneven wavering V. Underfoot the black earth is spongy with unseen life that exudes sweetness with every step. Clouds cover the sun, but just before it sinks below the horizon, it casts a brilliant slant of light across the cover crops. They have almost stopped growing but are still alive,

their roots holding the soil in place against winter winds, rain, snow, and come what may.

When I return home I nearly trip over the Blue Hubbard, still squatting on the stairs. Large as it is, it had almost disappeared in the solstice gloaming, becoming part of the monochromatic scenery of winter.

I bring it into the house, cradling it in my arms like a sleeping baby. I place it on the bathroom scale where it registers a magisterial 16 pounds. Then I set it on the table and sit down in front of it. The quieter I become, the more I can hear and the farther I see.

It was at around this time last year, probably during a long night near the solstice, that my farmer friend ordered Blue Hubbard squash seeds, along with hundreds of other varieties of vegetables for his farm. After the seeds arrived, they waited on a shelf until the soil was not too wet and not too dry, not too cold and not too warm. When the time was right, the farmer slipped the papery seeds into the soil. With rain, the seed coats softened; roots emerged and pushed downward.

Then the stem arched upward, breaking into daylight. The cotyledons unfolded and their chloroplast factories began turning solar energy into carbohydrates. The plant grew rapidly until the vines were some 20 feet long.

Near the summer solstice, big yellow squash flowers blossomed and were pollinated by native flies or honeybees. Then the flower collapsed in on itself, and a small, green, soft-skinned fruit began to form. The plant continued to gather solar energy, but now it went to form the sweet flesh of the rapidly growing squashes—two to five per plant.

One hundred sunrises and one hundred sunsets later, the squashes were ten to 20 pounds each, and their tender green skin had turned blue-gray and formed a hard shell. Beneath the protective armor was a two- to three-inch layer of bright orange flesh. And hiding within the hollow center cavity were plenty of seeds for next year’s squash.

The farmer had waited for cold weather to sweeten the squash before harvesting them. And the time my squash had spent outside my house had further sweetened it, starches converting to sugars as a natural antifreeze. But now, with the solstice and the holidays approaching, it was time to cook the blue beast, perfect in its

imperfections, lumpy yet smooth, elegant as celadon ceramics.

I got out my largest, heaviest knife and largest cutting board. I balanced the Blue Hubbard on the board, and we stood still for a long moment—the sun, the squash, the knife, and I—all balanced on the cusp of change.