

Reaping Havoc

A Powhatan-Philadelphia farm experiment goes awry. By CLARKE C. JONES

ILLUSTRATION BY TYLER DARDEN

I've occasionally fantasized about becoming a gentleman farmer. Not a real farmer, because real farming involves physical labor and sweat, and I have a strong aversion to perspiration. I think that phobia dates to my high school days when, at the prompting of my father, who subscribed to the philosophy that hard work builds character, I took a job that involved pulling 50-pound bags of sand out of boxcars and moving 400-pound drums of oil and asphalt products. That experience convinced me that lifting very heavy things all day in the summer heat was not as virtuous as my father imagined. I could see myself puttering around on a tractor—bush-hogging a field, say—but the only sweating I'd want to see is on a glass of single malt, sitting beside me on the veranda as I listen to the quail tell each other good night.

Unfortunately, that dream went poof last summer. That's when my new bride, raised in downtown Philadelphia, expressed her desire for a vegetable garden on a 14-acre field in Powhatan County, about 30 minutes from our home. In the most loving terms, I tried to explain to her the impracticality of maintaining a remote garden. The voracious deer, the indefatigable weeds, the persistent insects, the drought, and the lack of water on the property—all would conspire against a productive harvest. My argument, aimed at keeping my wife free of disappointment and me free of sweat, fell on deaf ears.

My wife, it turns out, loves a challenge—and so commenced our Powhatan/Philly Farm Experiment. Within days, I had made the following outlays:

Pay farmer to disk field: \$300.00
Pumpkin seed, corn seed, watermelon seed, cantaloupe seed, sunflower seed and wild game seed: \$150.00
Lime: \$150.00

Poison for weed control: \$50.00

Seed spreader: \$40.00

There went \$700 before a single seed had been sown.

Then came the work. I spent the next weeks in the boiling sun with a hilling hoe, hand-sowing vegetable seeds. The payoff would come in six weeks, I reminded myself, when beautiful vegetables would grace our dinner table. Garden planted, I walked the rest of the 14 acres with a shoulder-mounted broadcaster, spreading the sunflower and wild game seeds.

A local farmer, William Arrington, stopped by one day. He pointed out to me that sunflower and game seeds need to be covered or they will not germinate. He suggested that I use a "drag" for the job—a bar that runs parallel to the rear of your tractor and drags a row of iron tines that break up the earth and cover the seeds. I didn't have one, but Farmer Arrington offered to lend me his drag. I refused, knowing that when I borrow equipment I tend to end up buying it. Arrington reminded me that a drag is made of pig iron, impossible to damage. I relented and accepted. A few hours later, real Farmer Arrington learned that he'd underestimated pretend Farmer Jones when I ran over the *only* stump in the entire field, twisting the drag's iron crossbar into an ugly V shape. Farmer Arrington picked up the pieces of the drag and left, holding \$50 from me to help defray the repair cost.

After three weeks, we noticed

corn shoots were poking through the dirt. So was the Johnson grass—a fast-growing, strangling weed that's the bane of many gardens. Another week passed, and the pumpkin or watermelon vines began to appear—we couldn't actually tell which because the vines were mostly hidden in what was fast becoming a Johnson grass jungle. The fertilizer and lime I'd spread to give the vegetables a boost had done



wonders for the weeds instead. I applied weed killer (\$38), but it had no effect. I rented a garden tiller to fight the encroachment, but this \$40 investment only reaffirmed my high-school labor logic: Do not wrestle a machine over hard clay in oppressive heat. My wife took over the job.

Weeks passed, without rain. That meant that I had to start ferrying water 20 miles to the field, there to pour it on shriveling corn and anemic vines. The new Mrs. Jones walked up and down the rows, speaking to the corn in soft, encouraging tones. That spiritual approach did not protect her from hardship: She contracted a severe case of sun poisoning. To keep working, she donned a bonnet and wore a white covering over her face,

which turned out to be the last of my monogrammed handkerchiefs. The woman who months prior had been a vision of loveliness at our wedding reception now looked like she'd stepped off the set of *Elephant Man*. And there were more difficulties. My wife, who had never before seen a tick, seemed to be infested with the tiny blood-suckers every time she left the garden. She bravely learned how to remove ticks, only to discover a more beastly insect—the chigger!

Bug spray: \$14.00; various anti-itch creams: \$25.00; one tractor rental with bush hog attachment to clear paths so wife can tend garden: \$300.00.

The rain finally came as I was doing some much-needed weeding. I stood in the downpour, facing skyward in thanks, as in that famous scene from the *Shawshank Redemption*. The ensuing storm, with heavy winds, wiped out nearly half of our corn crop.

Applied for stimulus money. Application denied.

One week later came joyous news. My wife, scrounging among the ruins, plucked five ears of Silver Queen corn and hurried home to fix dinner. Unfortunately, after shucking, only two ears were edible—bugs had beaten us to the others. She returned the next day to pick more but was too late: Deer had polished off the harvest the night before. They had also enjoyed the blooms on the melons and pumpkins. The gourds never had a chance.

It was sad to see our little farm, and my wallet, in a shambles. In the end,

I calculated that I had spent close to \$1,200 for two ears of corn and one small pumpkin. "This was a learning experience," I told my wife, with a comforting hug. My comfort came from knowing that we wouldn't be repeating this fiasco. "Farming is an iffy proposition and best left to those who know what they are doing," I said, with a thankful sigh.

Did I mention that my wife loves a challenge? She looked up at me with a determined expression and said, "Honey, the way I figure it, all we need is about two and a half miles of electrical fence and a generator—we'll have our garden next year!"

The tilling and check-writing season was many months away, but I'd already started to sweat. ●

The new Mrs. Jones walked up and down the rows, speaking to the corn in soft, encouraging tones. That spiritual approach did not protect her from hardship: She contracted a severe case of sun poisoning.