

MACHINERY THRILL

*Falling in love...
with her Allis Chalmers G*

BY BETSY ALLISTER

It started about a year ago: my partner Andrew would get all moony-eyed whenever he uttered the name “Allis.” I wasn’t jealous—Allis Chalmers is a line of tractors—but I didn’t share his enthusiasm. I chose a life of farming for many reasons; at the top of my list is good food, an energizing community, hard physical work, and working with Andrew

every day. Even way down that list, you won’t find the word “tractor.”

When I think about the farming season from the dead of winter, I imagine beet-stained fingers, snuffling pigs, the mixed-up smells of dirt and sweat and tomato plants, and smiling CSA members with arms full of vegetables (or, if I’m in a bad mood, I think of smashing potato bugs and having to move irrigation lines). Never equipment.

My eyes have always glazed over when farming friends discuss tools and machines—to say I am not “mechanically minded” is a gentle way of phrasing things. If heirloom tomatoes are the poetry of farming, equipment, for me, is the prose. But our farm is larger this year—we have about three acres of vegetables, and 50 CSA members—so I gave in, and we got ourselves a tractor, an Allis Chalmers G. Now I am shocked to find myself rhapsodizing about this beautiful tractor to everyone, from friends in med school to former high school teachers; occasionally I catch the glazed look in their eyes that I know so well.

This is our third season farming, and our first with a tractor. Our insurance agent lit up when we informed her that we finally had a piece of equipment to insure. When we explained that it was a tractor from 1948, all she could do was laugh. But purchasing a tractor that our grandparents could have used is no act of nostalgia, nor is it motivated simply by cost (although the price tag isn’t bad). It is challenging to find



BETSY ALLISTER



To ahead...
GRILL US!

Our Meat & Seafood buyer Spencer Roth has visited Coastal Seafoods, Thousand Hills Cattle Company, and looks forward to attending the 2012 Eat Local Farm Tour.

He speaks with our local suppliers weekly, so he always knows what’s fresh and delicious. Our staff is passionate about local, sustainable agriculture—so go ahead, grill us! We know good food.



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equipment designed for the particular needs of small-scale vegetable farming—much of that equipment seems more common as antique lawn decor than in the farming classifieds. The Allis Chalmers G is one of a handful of tractors designed specifically for vegetables, and they were all manufactured between 1948 and 1955.

Although I find it charming, I'll be the first to admit that the Allis G is odd-looking. The engine sits on the back instead of the front, so the driver is able to look directly down at the rows. We mostly use the tractor with seed hoppers or a set of tools called "basket weeders"—round wire baskets which are mounted under the tractor; as the tractor moves, the baskets spin and fluff up the soil, removing weeds. We prepare beds for planting by driving over them with the baskets pushed together, to kill off the first flush of weeds and get a fine, loose seed bed (last year, we hoed and then raked every bed by hand). When it's time to plant, we attach seed hoppers to the belly of the tractor and seed right into the ground (last year, we did this with a push seeder—slow, less accurate, and anything but straight). Once the crops are up, we hook the baskets back to the tractor and set them so they weed precisely on either side and between the rows we seeded.



On board her Allis Chalmers G, Betsy Allister has learned to love her "new" tractor. Photo courtesy of Betsy Allister

(I'm sure you can imagine how we weeded last year.) It's hard to quantify how much time we save—all I know is that we are planting twice as much land, and it feels like less.

I never thought I would write an ode to a tractor. Although a 10-horsepower 1948 tractor is hardly cutting-edge, I tend to romanticize the simplicity of life without the roar and guzzle of machines. Much of the work we do as farmers has barely changed throughout

history—pulling weeds, harvesting, cleaning vegetables—and I want to stay connected to that lineage. Perhaps some of my disinterest in equipment talk has been stubborn resistance, a fear that mechanization would take away the poetry of farming. But this little tractor has done nothing of the sort—it has brought us the freedom to grow better vegetables, and to feed more community members. And there is something seductive about riding a tractor in the late summer evening, a tractor small and quiet enough that you can still hear crickets and crows; watching the weeds turn under and the rows of freckled lettuce seem to stand up straighter. William Carlos Williams said, "A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words." And if a poem can be a machine, perhaps it can be the other way around. ☺

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