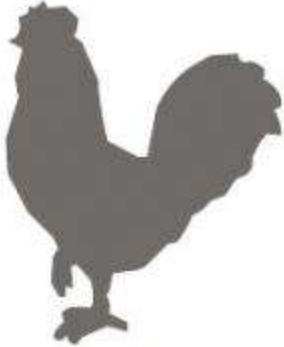


Sheep, Solar Panels, and Wild Ramps

The Next Harvest

By Jennifer Megyesi



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The sheep have spring fever. It's a wonder they do, considering how cold and dry April was. Hopefully, this week's rain will start making the grass grow, and even coax some morel mushrooms out of the forest's leaf litter. I haven't put the sheep out to pasture yet, because the grass is still too short, and they'll start pulling it up by the roots and overgraze the pastures. They're still confined to the back paddock, where they wistfully look out at the green, but stubby pasture, resigned to eating the round bales of hay put up last summer. It doesn't help that the youngest lambs can shimmy under the metal gates into the fields, taunting the ewes, as they cavort and graze, free-range.

This year the sheep will graze in two places, one in Thetford near the [Union Village Dam](#), and the other on Gee Hill in [Royalton](#). The Thetford arrangement is a longtime one; a landscaper keeps the sheep near his business to add to the bucolic nature of his property. He buys the lambs for his employees as holiday gifts. I graze the lambs with their mothers, and then pick up the mothers in the fall.

The Royalton arrangement is new, and the brainchild of Tunbridge Solar and [Aaron Kelly](#). Aaron and his business partners have created an 8-acre solar farm just past the sandpit and railroad tracks. The operation is one of the only solar installations in the state that actually keeps the energy it generates inside [Vermont](#). In fact, it supplies the [Vermont Law School](#) with 50% of the energy required to run the school.

The solar farms popping up all over the state have been a bit of an obsession of mine; I'm all for renewable energy when it benefits the state whose land it occupies, but the maintenance of vegetation at these installations is not always well thought out. It's a paradox to me that renewable energy requires non-renewable resources to maintain, like herbicides, or lawn mowers.

The sheep seem like a green alternative, they'll graze around the solar panels with their lambs, and it allows me a way to increase my flock without overburdening my pastures at the farm. In the fall, the flock will return to the farm, which has an overabundance of winter housing. Instead of paying to maintain the solar farm's vegetation using herbicide or mowers, Aaron will supply the hay needed to keep the extra sheep over the winter. We'll see if it works. We're both enthusiastic about it, but optimistically cautious about the outcome.

I went to [East Topsham](#) to buy my piglets today, dove-tailing it with a maple sugaring inspection. The farmer, Grace, has two huge sows, an enormous boar and raises about 30 piglets a year to sell and another handful to grow for barbecue pigs. Her animals were calm and clean, and barn cats milled around our feet as we loaded the five piglets into dog crates in the back of the truck.

I covered the cages with an old sleeping bag and drove the 45 miles back home, scanning the banks along the way for patches of wild leeks-ramps. Even though the spring has been as it has, they're ever faithful to appear in April and May. At the farm, the five acres of them along the third branch of the [White River](#) glisten emerald in the morning sun. Here's a recipe for use now, and another for a great way to preserve them for later in the season, after the leaves have gone, and only the bulbs lie like jewels hidden below the soil.

Ramps in Vinegar

½ to 1 pound ramps (about 24-36 plants)

1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice

2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar

1 tablespoon stone-ground mustard sea salt to taste extra-virgin olive oil to taste

Cut the leaves from the stems and bulbs. Boil these in salted water for about 2 minutes, to mellow their strong taste. Remove with a slotted spoon, then plunge the leaves in and cook for about 30 seconds. Drain and dry in a colander or a towel.

Combine the lemon juice, vinegar, mustard and salt in a jar and shake to blend. Add the oil and shake again.

Spread the ramps in a serving dish and pour the dressing over them. Cover and chill until serving.

Wild Ramp Butter

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

¼ to ½ cup ramps, leaves, stems and bulbs finely chopped

¾ tsp sea salt

1 tsp fresh ground pepper

¾ tsp dried oregano or thyme

1 stick unsalted butter, softened to room temperature

In a skillet, heat the oil over medium heat. Add the chopped ramps, salt, pepper, and herbs, stirring occasionally, for 2 minutes. Put the butter in a glass or stainless steel bowl and pour the heated mixture over it. Blend well. You can freeze the butter in ice cube trays and store it in freezer bags after it has set. The butter is great over fish, cooked pasta, or as a baste on roast chicken.

The Next Harvest is a bi-weekly column about food and farming written by [Jennifer Megyesi](#) of [Fat Rooster Farm](#) in [South Roylton](#).