



Back to earth A visit to Squash Blossom Farms

By Jim O'Donnell

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Near the greenhouse, Ty Minton found a big, fat fuzzy caterpillar and he wasn't sure what, exactly, it was. "I was so excited," he said. "I ran inside, grabbed the iPad and raced back out here before it was gone. I spent quite awhile pouring over pictures online, trying to match it up with the thing that was there in front of me."

That's a man truly in touch with the power of the pollinator.

"I couldn't figure it out," he said. "It had to be a friend though."

That fact is that nearly 90 percent of all plant species need the help of animals to act as pollinators. About 75 percent of the crops grown world-wide for human consumption likewise depend on plant pollinators to propagate.

Gael and Ty Minton of Squash Blossom Farms get that.

Gael was waiting for one of her Community Supported Agriculture members under a blue umbrella with bags of beets, green onions, chard, mixed lettuce, sugar snap peas, cucumbers, garlic and a stack of herbs when I arrived.

Towards Picuris a purple-ish mass of clouds had formed and was, at that moment, rushing down on us. Lightning splayed out in front and the thunder was disconcerting.

"I love to hear the rain come through the trees," Gael said.

All around her blazed the most impressive array of flowers: Cosmos, Rocky Mountain bee plant, gigantic day lilies, daisies, milkweed, pink and yellow yarrows, echinacea, bachelors buttons, hibiscus.

There are something like 200,000 different species of animals around the world that act as pollinators. The majority of these are invertebrates, such as flies, beetles, butterflies, moths, and bees. About 1,000 — and among the most important — are vertebrates, such as birds, bats, and small mammals.

The Mintons' flowers hosted hundreds of these. The hummingbirds nearly drowned out the thunder. Painted ladies, Swallowtails and Monarch butterflies bobbed past us and out into the garden rows. Honey bees? Yes, those too. "We decided to go heavy on the flowers early on to make sure that our food products were pollinated and producing. The flowers have only grown in importance. We've got a bee hive now and I like to keep them happy," said Gael. "And they are pretty."

About 25 percent of the food we put in our mouth would not exist without pollinators. The contribution pollinators make to our food resources and the economy is massive. It has been calculated that insect-pollinated foods were worth about \$40 billion to the American economy in the year 2000.

It was clear to me that the Mintons were farming pollinators as much as they were farming food.

Ty was born and raised in Roswell but he left for 38 years, settling in New England, marrying Gael and raising a family. Despite careers in education, the Mintons had amassed years of gardening experience before they returned to New Mexico in 2001.

Gael had founded a CSA in New Hampshire that had 65 customers at its height. They knew exactly what they wanted, purchasing two acres on the Acequia del Monte of the Rio Chiquito and opening the CSA in 2003.

First they had to grow something however. When they bought the land it had been horribly overgrazed and there was little vegetation, just bits of bindweed. They set to healing the land with massive amounts of compost and sand (to loosen the clay) and plantings to start opening the soil and moving the nutrients around.

The success after just nine years is stunning.

Squash Blossom Farm feels even smaller than the two acres it is. Entering from the driveway along flowered path, the growing area is a paradise of dappled light falling through thirty-some fruit trees and the subtle crescents of raised beds that alternate flowers with vegetables.

The first thing that strikes you is how ordered it all is. The second is just how much is growing on that two acres. Ty responds to my amazement by saying "People don't understand how much you can grow in a small space."

The Mintons do some extensive companion planting. The parsley was worked into the asparagus, the carrots were getting some serious tomato love, pole beans shaded the lettuces and pumpkins and squash mounds were interspersed with nasturtiums. The fennel was, of course, by itself.

"I do rotation to keep that soil healthy," says Gael "but I'm not good at cover-cropping. I'd like to find a way to work it in." "But truth be told," interrupted Ty, "We're just not suffering. Everything grows so well, it just hasn't been a priority." Gael nodded.

The Squash Blossom CSA has eight families at the moment and an herb share with the SMU-Taos kitchen. Gael thinks it is a good number but it is just not enough to cover costs so she hopes to get up to 12 members next year.

“A CSA is a wonderful thing. You don’t have to leave the farm. You can trade and bargain surrounded by all of this,” Gael laughed, “I love having people come out to the farm.”

“We feel like we’re building a community here,” says Ty. “The gentleman who Roto-tills the garden beds wants to be paid in honey. We sell our hay to another gentleman who pays in beef. Beef fed from our own hay. It’s the way a neighborhood should be.”

I asked Gael if they were big into cooking what they grew themselves. They both nodded.

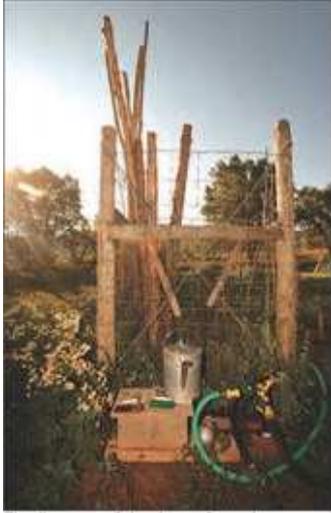
“I’m getting increasingly simple in how I cook and eat, however,” Gael said. “Ty is getting more complicated. He makes nutritional flour from the elm seeds and last summer took the native locust blooms and made a tempura.”

“We are inspired by the whole movement. You know, Wes Jackson and Wendell Berry are definitely mentors of mine. We want all small farmers to succeed. Part of the great thing about CSAs and small farms is not that we want to go backwards but to use the best of the pre-industrial farming and apply it to what we know now.”

“We hear rumblings that the CSA movement has peaked and is in decline. I hope not,” said Gael, “There is such huge potential. And so many neighbors to feed.”



Gael Minton, right, hands Squash Blossom Farms CSA member Sheryl Summers a bouquet of flowers — something extra Minton likes to give to members when they come to pick up their produce.



The first sun of the day at Squash Blossom Farms.



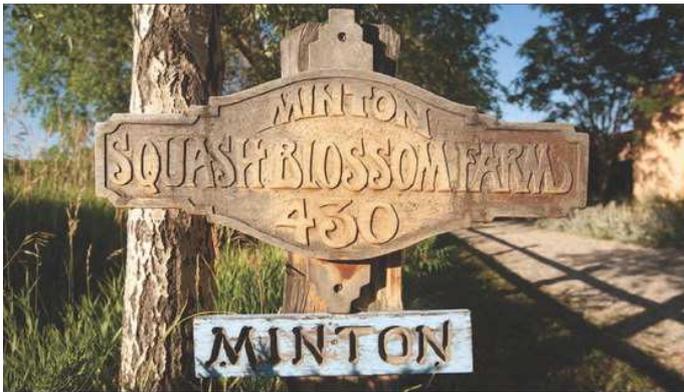
A row of garlic



Ingredients for Gael Minton's gluten-free lilac scones.



Gael Minton, co-owner of Squash Blossom Farms, holds freshly picked garlic.



Photographs by Tina Larkin ♦ The Taos News

Hand-made signs posted at the entrance to Squash Blossom Farms off Este Es Place.