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The rainfall pattern

For anyone growing food the pattern and timing of rainfall is as important as quantity. We had a good early start this autumn, with over 171mm of rainfall in September and October.

On the high mountains this laid down a good amount of snow. Frozen rain represents a savings account. If temperatures do not rise, then more rain will add to the amount. In spring, when temperatures rise and there is a lessening chance of rainfall, melting snow soaks into the mountain-side re-charging aquifers and

springs ready for the summer.

However, although we had a good start, premature rising temperatures has melted most of the snow, which means there is little in this year's rainfall savings account to draw on in next year's growing season.

Early in the year, although we had spring rain. It was light and extended, which meant that it did not hydrate the deeper levels of soil, which had negative consequences for the fruit trees.



Early snow in the Alpujarras

Harvest festival



Only one of the 'harvests' of tomatoes and tomatillos.

The formal celebration of a harvest safely gathered in, varies from place to place. Here at Semilla Besada, it is generally mid-November.

This year, we certainly had something to celebrate. There was an increase in what was harvested, and in what we preserved for winter use.

We collected 82 winter squashes; bottled 24 litres of tomato and pepper sauce, 2 litres of ratatouille, 60 jars of jam and marmalade; dried a kilo of tomatoes, 500g of mushrooms, 500g of peppers, 4 kilos pears, 5 kilos cherries, 1 kilo strawberries, and over a kilo a plums.

We also laid down 25 litres of

Costa wine, and even harvested an unexpected 945gms of olives. Semilla Besada, at 1300m, is too high to expect olives. The growing season is too short to ripen the fruit.

In the ground, to be harvested over the winter, we also have Swiss Chard, Carrots, Turnips, Cabbage and Chinese Cabbage.

An autumn planting of Broad Beans and dwarf Peas, of a variety known as Meteor, will hopefully fill in the 'hungry gap' early next year.

This year's harvest represented a significant move towards increased food security.

Special points of Interest:

- Saffron Crocus
- Saving Seed
- Elements of Food Security



Three year old Saffron crocus flowers

Saffron Crocus (*Crocus sativus*)

We have been growing Saffron Crocus for nine years, starting with only five bulbs: we now have over 300. These produced a harvest of 7.5 gms of organic saffron.

Saffron originated from Turkey, and was taken to the Himalayas early in the 20th century, where it is now cultivated in Kashmir. It takes 100,000 bulbs to produce a kilo of saffron. The current retail price of a gram of saffron is €2.52.

This makes it a very high value product, but also one that requires a great deal of space, and labour to harvest

sufficient quantities for a viable economic return.

Although used in cooking as a flavouring and colorant, it also has medicinal properties. It reduces high blood pressure, improves digestion, stimulates circulation and menstruation, and increases perspiration.

The Chinese use it to dispel what they call 'stagnant liver energy'.



7.5 gms of organic saffron

Seasonal festivals

'Stir up we beseech thee the pudding in the pot'



Lindsay, a volunteer, making a wish for the coming year.

Traditionally, on the 23rd November the parish priest would call upon the Lord to 'stir-up ... the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may be of thee plenteously rewarded'.

The choir boys, however, had their own version 'Stir up, we beseech thee, the pudding in the pot ..'. Perhaps this is why it is the traditional time of year to make the Christmas pudding.

At Semilla Besada, we all take our turn to stir the pudding clockwise,

and make a wish for the coming year. Included in the pudding is a silver sixpence (from a very old coin collection!). Whoever finds it on Christmas day is assured of a good year ahead.

The recipe calls for over a kilo of mixed fruit and nuts, added to which are spices, sugar, butter, eggs, breadcrumbs, brandy and stout.

The pudding, once baked, is set aside until Christmas day, when it is reheated and served with brandy butter.

Sweet Chestnuts



Chestnut husks

With three Sweet Chestnut trees, over a 100 years' old, chestnuts are very much part of our autumn harvest. Both animals and humans enjoy this sweet, starchy nut.

Harvested out of their prickly casing, the chestnuts are stored in a dry, but cool area, to avoid dehydrating the nuts. This year's harvest was over 40 kilos.

The Spanish have a specialized pan for roasting the nuts. It is about the size of a conventional frying pan, but the base is covered with holes about 1 cm in diameter, which allow the flame, either from a gas cooker, or a log fire, to cook the chestnuts to perfection.



How did our mothers do?

After seven years of working towards this end, we appear to have in the Andalusian Blue poultry, a breed that consistently and successfully rears its own young.

This year, we had eight mothers, two of whom sat twice on eggs. They raised 44 chicks in total. There were 42% losses from the early chickhood illness, and 25% losses in the later clutches from misadventure, infertile eggs, or stillbirth.

Despite these losses, we tripled our flock size this year.

A number of these young pullets are cockerels and are destined for the table. The young hens will begin to lay eggs next year. Although this is later than a battery bird, it is of no consequence for our purposes.

Interestingly, the only consistent mothers have been the hens with the slate grey feathers and the black head and neck. If there

is a continued correlation, then this will provide a foundation for future management. We want to ensure that the desire to sit on eggs (broodiness) remains strong within the flock.

As we are more concerned with having a good utility breed, than a rare breed, we may introduce other breeds known for broodiness.



Mother, with six-week old chicks free-ranging

Saving Seed



Saving our own seed is a crucial part of food security. We now have in our library 75 varieties of vegetables, 11 of herbs, 6 varieties of perennial grasses, 22 of trees

and shrubs, and 9 of flowers. Saving seed takes space and time. Most vegetables require a minimum of 100 plants to provide sufficient diversity to prevent the negative effects of inbreeding.

Some vegetables, such as onions, are biannual and so need to stay in the ground for nearly two years in order to produce seed.

We have not been able to save pea seed due to pea weevil

damage, and still buy in supplies from Tamar Organics in England.

Similarly, we have not had the space to save carrot and winter lettuce seed. These we continue to buy from Biau Germe in France.

We have also saved no onion seed to date. The variety we have been growing is Barbosa, which performs very well, but the seed are not organic. We have yet to find a variety that performs as well in this environment.

Saving seed takes time and space

Changing neighbours



Our good neighbour of 10 years, Paco, has decided to let his farm and its livestock to professional goat farmers from Barcelona.

This highlighted how much we were going to miss him. The easy exchanges of goods and services, the trust we had built up, and the friendly conversations about, and advice on, small-scale family farming.

However, Paco has not given up on life on the mountain. He has started again lower down on a smaller patch of land.

Our new neighbours are Jesus and Rosa, and their two sons, who intend to introduce a new breed of milking goat. From their milk, they hope to produce yoghurt, and cheese.



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NEWS FLASH

Holistic Management Seminars

It's easy to think that Holistic Management is only relevant to farmers, but the principles of sound management apply whoever you are, and wherever you live.

The financial and life planning elements are a real bonus in this time of uncertain economies and greater stress. Aspen has also added an environmental component geared for anyone who lives in an urban environment. Although people who live in towns and cities don't manage land, their daily decisions have an enormous impact on those that do.

For details of seminars in 2009 [click here](#).

Semilla Besada is a 16 hectare family farm, set in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains in southern Spain.



The focus of the farm is 'triple bottom line' health, where all decisions are tested for long-term social, environmental and economic sustainability. These decisions are then monitored to ensure that we take timely remedial action when we go off course.

We provide the only working model of Holistic Management in mainland Europe, and offer educational opportunities to the local and international community in Holistic Management and Dry-land Permaculture.

Landscape management



Condition of terrace in 2006



Impact of the sheep on the ground after 3 days grazing

When we arrived, the Chestnut tree terrace was in poor condition. The understorey consisted of few grasses, a build-up of dead chestnut husks and leaves, and some unhealthy indigenous woody perennials.

The husks and leaves could not break down *in situ* due to the low year-round moisture. So, these were cleared by hand, and added to compost heaps.

The woody perennials, which traditionally would have been kept in good health by judicious browsing by goats and sheep, were pruned by hand.

This left the dry and rather unproductive understorey of grasses. Using metal hurdles, we contained the sheep on the terrace for 3 days.

They ate all the standing vegetation, broke-up the soil surface,



Condition of terrace in 2008

and left fertility to support future plant growth.

We then left the terrace to recover for two years.