



Vermont Vegetable and Berry News –April 3, 2013
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REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

(Burlington) For anyone that has a lot of pruning to complete in the spring. I just invested in Felco electric pruners. I don't know how I did it without them. They are faster, the cuts are cleaner, I can prune longer hours and most importantly my hand isn't sore for months afterwards from all of the repetitive action. Well worth the investment.

(Wolcott) Replacing the plastic on the greenhouse is holding us up a bit with getting things started. Other new upgrades for the greenhouse include hose trolley, vacuum seeder and possible potting bench. The snow is melting fast and hopefully the fields dry out fast as well. The plan is ready to go, just need to hire people to help carry it out. I have faith the right people will find their way here. Biennials are growing nicely but we are finding out about some disease issues with crops that are overwintered. *Alternaria brassicicola* has taken down a few broccolis; we need to keep our eye on the survivors and be more aware of plant health at transplant and going into the winter. Other than that, making sure everything is greased, geared and lubed well.

(Jericho) Hoophouse crops holding out through the cold, snowy spring, though growth certainly slower than last spring when March warm weather kick started everything. Growing some quick rounds of greens in floor space under benches in the greenhouse to fill some gaps. Waiting to get into the fields and getting as much as possible of the non-field related work out of the way now in anticipation of a narrow window to get the fields planted this spring. Field low tunnels covered and warming up with hopes of transplanting once we get through this week of cold nights with temperatures in the teens. March seems to be in reverse these past two years: in like a lamb out like a lion.

(South Burlington/Shelburne) I am starting to wonder about the need for covering winter tunnel crops at all, except during below 10 degrees outside temps. We need to experiment with this. All crops are still producing well and even with the cold March and start to April, things are growing fast because of the extended daylight. Feb kale is growing well and I hope to harvest it by early May.

(Abington CT) Our new Modine hot water to air heat exchanger (148k Btu for a 22x44 greenhouse) is working great, it maintains temperature in the greenhouse all night even on less than ideal wood in the outdoor boiler. The boiler is set up for radiant heat for a 30x96 sugarhouse/kitchen; we have connected one greenhouse to this system and will have a second greenhouse running off it shortly as well. Transplants growing well, no pests, trying worm castings and EM-1 Microbial Inoculant (so far unactivated) from Fedco this year. I had planned on having seeds in the ground already but this normal spring and good maple season are welcomed instead. Breaking ground this morning, here's to our first season of mostly draft animal-power (oxen and Percherons.) We have gotten a lot of wonderful info from the Draft Animal-Power Network!

(Elmore) Very deep snow up here; the kind you fall through when you walk across it. We are grafting fruit trees from local favorites to keep the best ones going for another generation. Our high tunnel is standing tall after losing one last spring. Spinach made it with no cover, turnips and Swiss chard under a frost blanket inside. Strawberries not happy in the tunnel; too dry? We have already planted the entire tunnel to spring greens and roots and flowers. Guess it means we are hopeful and ready to be seeing green again, up close. Ginger is pre-sprouting, but hard to keep it in the 70-80 degree range it likes. We planted our first peach tree in the tunnel and have high hopes; will add a fig tree soon. The best thing about the high tunnel is the moist warm air we get on spring days without any energy source other than the sun.

(Plainfield NH) Fields along the Connecticut are drying out slowly as weather is unseasonably cool with some dampness. Ground has thawed enough to get deer fence up and charged. Grafting tomatoes still underway, with first tomato houses planted and looking satisfactory. A little concerned about thrips; last week we had a population spike in the prop house, due to the lengthening daylight and warmer greenhouse temps. Also found a winged aphid on the yellow sticky card. Ginger sprouting nicely; seeding vegetables for the field as well as pack sales. Real estate in the greenhouses is beginning to bring a premium and soon pansies and onions will be moved to the cold frames. Need to prune peaches.

(West Rutland) For the last three weeks, we've been harvesting spinach, arugula, and mesclun that we direct seeded into our high tunnel in early October, plus lots of kale. Demand has been high at the Rutland Winter Farmers Market and we've sold out the weeks we've attended. The "kale raab" flew off the table as well. The florets are so sweet. Most beds in the high tunnel have been cleared out, radishes, salad turnips, and greens are coming along for May markets, and we'll be transplanting more greens. Seedlings are looking good.

(Middle Granville NY) The weather is finally starting to break. Daily time temperatures are averaging in the 50's and nights are starting to be in the 30's. Looking over the temps between last year and this year; Feb of this year was 8 degrees cooler, March was 11 degrees cooler. No wonder things aren't growing like last year! Fields are starting to dry out- we will be tilling by the end of the week on ground that was prepped and bedded up last fall. Overwintered onions are looking good. They survived the winter in the mini-tunnels even though they only had one layer of 30-weight rowcover on them. We will be weeding and fertilizing them this week. Greenhouses are okay. Some serious Cercospora in the spinach which is not being driven back by Actinovate or Oxidate. New plantings of greens are coming on, overwintered kale, Swiss chard and Asian greens are bolting. Hoophouses are replanted with spring greens. Tomatoes go in late next week. Went to an auction in MA last Saturday. Prices on some things were shockingly low. Barely used 35K onion bagging line went for 5 K, Beautiful 20 foot tri-fold transport disk, \$1800. Ford 8600 with new rubber, \$6000. I have to keep reminding myself I am not in the equipment business. Did pick up rotary table, packing supplies, and a 1500 gallon tank to expand our water storage system.

(Fairfax) Have been heating two greenhouses with wood pellets so far with no issues. Buying pellets at \$230 ton delivered which is equivalent to about \$1.35 gallon propane, although you have to factor in the labor of handling them. Corn prices are out of sight, so the LDJ Amazing corn furnace is no longer being manufactured by LDJ. Have to buy it from LMF. But they did sell the parts rights to a guy in Iowa, so you can at least get parts for a while. I guess they figured there is no sense making a corn furnace with \$8 a bushel corn. We have had great luck with a Maxim outdoor boiler burning pellets. This is our second year with it and no issues yet. Still the payback is rather lengthy when you figure these furnaces and boilers cost 5 to 10 times that of a Modine gas heater. We're certainly learning a lot about pellet heat.

(Salisbury NH) Finally some warmer weather and more importantly sunshine. Pretty much everything is up in the unheated single layer hoophouse. Pelletized carrots, Nelson, planted on 3/3 just breaking through. It helped when I put a strip of clear plastic over the raised bed to increase heat but more importantly keep the soil from dying out. Tunnel soil temp fluctuates quite a bit. It might be 45-50 degrees in the morning then get up to 60-65 during a sunny day. Our goal this year is to add some drip irrigation. Not sure that starting spinach in flats is worth the effort. Direct seeded looks almost same size and no root disturbance. Still seeing better growth of Skyphos red buttercrunch versus Nancy green Buttercrunch transplants, started at the same time. Have some erosion in late garden where we didn't get to cover crop.

TIMING STRAWBERRY MULCH REMOVAL

(adapted from Bob Tritten, Michigan State Univ.)

The best way to time straw mulch removal is to look for the beginning of leaf growth; you will need to inspect your fields. Randomly check 10 to 15 spots in a field and pull the straw off of two feet of row. If you see newly emerging leaves (they may be a yellow color) that are beginning to grow from the crown of the plant, the strawberries are ready to begin growth for the season and that straw needs to be removed. Concentrating on the earlier fruiting strawberries is usually a technique that will help to pinpoint straw removal. If you are on heavy soil and your soil has not dried yet, wait for a cold morning when there is a crust on the soil surface to reduce soil compaction. Before you remove straw, check the forecast, if cold weather is predicted, you can delay a few days.

The earlier you remove the straw mulch, the earlier fruit will mature. Early growth may also necessitate more frost protection. In a really late spring there is also a danger of leaving straw on too long. A study was conducted a number of years ago in New England where straw was removed periodically over a six week period. The highest yields came from plants that were uncovered earliest in spring as was practical, following either snow melt or ability to move straw removal equipment through the field without creating ruts. The later the straw was removed the more yield was reduced.

Consider leaving a light layer of straw on the plants, about an inch thick. Leaves and flowers can grow up through this thin layer. Many times this will help to reduce disease problems later in the season, and will also help prevent some weed seeds from germinating if bare soil is exposed to sunlight. Lastly, mulch removal just prior to a rain event helps the plants respond well and keeps the mulch in place.

PRUNING BLUEBERRIES

The best time to prune is early spring, since winter-injured wood can be identified and removed. Here's a good article on pruning by Marvin Pritts of Cornell University:

<http://www.fruit.cornell.edu/berry/production/pdfs/blueberries/bbprunerejuv.pdf>.

There's also a nice 6-minute video on pruning by David Handley of UMaine Extension:

<http://umaine.edu/gardening/videos/how-to-prune-blueberry-bushes/>