ORGANIC PRACTICES FOR ELDERBERRY PRODUCTION

The Vermont Organic Farmers (VOF) Certification Guidelines provide general guidance for growers wishing to be certified in organic practices. The Guidelines are available on the VOF website http://nofavt.org/vof. Below are a few of the general guidelines to be aware of, as well as some tips specific for organic elderberry production.

General strategies to consider:

Avoid prohibited substances for at least three years: Fields to be certified as organic should have had no prohibited substances applied for three years immediately preceding the harvest. A list of allowed and prohibited substances can be found in the full VOF Guidelines Book on the VOF website: http://nofavt.org/vof/resources-guidelines/guidelines

Begin with certified organic stock. Purchase certified organic stock from a local nursery, or propagate plants from cuttings from certified organic plants. If selling stock yourself, it must be grown out for one year before selling it as organic nursery stock.

Consider no-till bed preparation and weed control: Reducing tillage will promote soil health by building up organic matter and favoring beneficial fungal microorganisms such as mycorrhizae.

Develop tolerance for some plant damage. You do not necessarily need to take action every time you see pest activity. Plants can tolerate and compensate for a fair amount of pest activity before the crop will be affected. For example, Japanese Beetles may make elderberry leaves look a little ragged, without impairing the overall health of the plant or economic yield. Tachinid Flies will parasitize Japanese Beetles and can do a good job of keeping the beetles under control. Wild parsnips and other plants in the dill and aster families provide habitat for Tachinid Flies and other beneficial insects.

Soil fertility: Continue to top dress the bushes with compost every year to two years. A ramial mulch will continue to add a slow release of nutrients.

Maximize biodiversity to provide habitat for the birds and insects that will naturally keep pest populations down. Promote flowering plants such as clovers, asters, goldenrods and milkweed in the strips between elderberry rows, and then stagger mowing the strips so there are always some flowering plants available for beneficial insects.

Only use (OMRI approved) chemical controls when all other (cultural, physical, genetic) control methods fail. If you have any questions about what products are allowed under organic certification, contact the VOF office: 802-434-3821, vof@nofavt.org or talk to your certifier.

Build organic matter to reduce need for irrigation: While it is important that new plantings do not dry out while getting established, it may be possible to avoid using drip tape or other expensive irrigation measures. If you have different types of soils on your property, plant elderberries in heavier soils with more organic matter as they will hold moisture better than sandier soils. Ramial mulch will help retain moisture and reduce the need to irrigate.

Keep records of practices: Certified organic producers are required to keep records of all production activities. The VOF Guidelines list the records required.

NO-TILL BED PREPARATION

1. Conduct a soil test to assess whether any specific nutrients need to be amended. Soil test kits can be obtained through the University of Vermont Soils lab: http://www.uvm.edu/pss/ag_testing/?Page=soils.html

2. Without tilling the bed, plant directly into the area where you want the elderberry bushes.

3. Top dress each plant with compost and any other soil amendments as indicated by the soil test.

4. Put down a layer of mulch or deciduous woodchips. Ramial mulch is a particularly good option. Ramial is chipped wood made from the branches and young stems of deciduous trees less than 3 inches in diameter. Ramial chips have a higher ratio of cambium to cellulose than chips made from heartwood, so it is higher in nutrients and has the ideal carbon to nitrogen ratio for promoting soil fungi and building organic matter – it effectively acts a slow-decomposing compost. Mulch at least 2 – 4 inches in depth, it is fine to mulch deeper if you have sufficient material.

5. Use a barrier material for weed control. For small areas, you can use flat sheets of corrugated cardboard – put the cardboard on top of the compost, and then put the ramial or wood chips on top of the cardboard. Landscape fabric is more practical for larger areas and is placed over the woodchips, mulch or ramial. Take up the landscape fabric in the fall to prevent voles from nesting underneath it. It can be replaced in the spring. Usually you will only need the landscape fabric for the first couple years until the plants are large enough that they will effectively shade out weeds, providing their own weed control.

6. Weed around each bush by hand as needed, especially during first two years when plants are getting established.

7. If there is enough bare soil, consider frost seeding a cover crop in the strips between the rows of elderberry plants. White clover is an excellent cover crop and will attract beneficial insects. (Because nematodes are a vector for Tomato Ringspot Virus and white clover is a host plant for nematodes there is some concern about using white clover as a cover crop. A mix of slow-growing grasses, such as hard fescue and dwarf perennial rye grass can be used as a cover crop in place of white clover. The UMASS Tree Fruit and Small Fruit diagnostics lab will test soil samples for nematodes. Contact: (413) 545-4347 for instructions.)

RESOURCES FOR ORGANIC MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

VOF Guidelines for Organic Certification of Fruit & Vegetable Crops – available on VOF website

Ramial Wood Chips: information available on internet, Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) has a number of good articles on Ramial

Biological Pest Control – working with habitat and beneficial insects to control pests

Xerces Society Book: Farming with Native Beneficial Insects
Cornell Extension website: Biological Control: A Guide to Natural Enemies in North America
University of California Integrated Pest Management for Elderberries

Funding for UVM Extension's Elderberry Project was provided in part by grants from the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative. For more information go to http://workinglands.vermont.gov/, and with a Rural Business Enterprise Grant from USDA Rural Development through the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and the Northern Border Regional Commission and Northern Community Investment Corporation

VERMONT WORKING LANDS ENTERPRISE INITIATIVE www.vermontworkinglands.com VHCB Vermont Farm Viability Program NCIC

(Prepared by Ginger Nickerson, John Hayden, and Nicole Dehne, August 2016)