

Vermont Vegetable and Berry News – November 24, 2009

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'WINTER GROWER' REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

(Montpelier) November in Vermont has been very kind and gone a long way towards making up for the miserable October we experienced. I am convinced that sun light is way more important than temperature where greenhouse salad is concerned. Our drainage project for the greenhouses is already showing some positive impact; there's a great deal less disease on the salad this fall. Still not sure if it's just drainage or also the cultivar, dry November or the spraying program. Probably all of them combined. The beds look great and have filled out nicely. Demand continues to outstrip supply to the point that I am focusing more on direct retail than wholesale, much to the dismay of wholesale customers. I am seeing some black spot on the claytonia. It occurs every year, does not kill the plants but the leaves are cosmetically challenged. Here's hoping the farmer's almanac is correct and we are in for a mild winter.

(Craftsbury) What winter? I don't think there's ever been a nicer first half of November in the Northeast Kingdom. We've had at least 7 days of sun so far; usually that would cover all of November and December. That being said our greenhouse crops are still behind as much of October was poorer than normal growing conditions and they are having trouble catching up.

(Durham CT) We might plant some more carrots, beets and lettuce before it gets really cold; everything else is planted and looks great. We're trying 7 green, samish, renegade for winter spinach. The bordeaux spinach has also been great as a late fall crop, but is now beginning to go to seed. The red stem is gorgeous and extremely sweet. Customers at the farmers market have really appreciated its good looks and taste. Some lettuces are still out in the field and doing well. Spicy mustards are also doing well. We've finally accomplished a goal that has been on the books for almost four years: keep harvesting outside until Thanksgiving. Most of the outside greens are kale, mustards, minutina and chard. For the third year, I am trying low tunnels. The first two year have not worked well because the plastic covers always blew off sooner or later, but this year, I am taking a cue from Bryan O'hara of Lebanon and making each low tunnel just 40 feet long. We'll see. Inside the high tunnels are bull's blood, chard, claytonia, mustards, kale and spinach. There was also a small amount of arugula, but I harvested that early; it tends to yellow after getting cold. Two winter markets, so we should be busy.

(Royalton) We usually can scrounge up some Brussels sprouts or leeks for Thanksgiving feast, but this year is crazy. There is kale, chard, sage, parsley, arugula, mustard greens, cress, and rutabagas still out in the fields. The head lettuce under the remay is almost ready. The hoophouse is still full of dill, carrots, beets, mustard, kale, rutabagas, chinese cabbages and radishes. The animals are still out on pasture, being fed hay, because the water hasn't frozen yet. I'm sure it'll soon change, but for now it's a pleasant change from this summer. Pigs and lambs, turkeys and meatbirds are all in the freezers. Celeriac, cabbage, potatoes, onions, garlic, winter squashes, celery, Brussels sprouts, beets, kohlrabi, leeks, all tucked away in winter storage. Just read an article in the Joy of Cooking that potting nettles in the earth cellar will yield blanched greens all winter. These are some of our favorites to eat in March, the first vibrant color green, peeking through the spring snows, packed full of 10 times more vitamin C and iron than spinach... no stings attached.

(Granville NY) Still harvesting from fields; lettuce, spinach salad mix, mesclun, arugua, braising mix, broccoli, and cauliflower. Tunnels and hoophouses are doing great, spinach is looking good, greens are coming along. We've had great germination so far- compared to last year, what a relief. Markets are really strong, last weekend was our best ever in 5 years of farming. Trying mini tunnels over Swiss chard and kale this fall- we'll see how it works out.

(Starksboro) We are trialing different techniques and varieties for overwintering spinach in high tunnels. We planted Corfu, Renegade, Giant Winter and Tye. The major lesson learned so far is that spinach we planted in mid-Sept. hoping to harvest in late fall seems just right for overwintering, but spinach we planted around Oct. 10th hoping to overwinter seems too small. We pulled all of our blighted tomatoes early so we have two greenhouses planted with spinach, we have a Haygrove tunnel half constructed, which we also planted with spinach. We'll put the finishing touches on the tunnel this winter and pull the plastic over the spinach in the spring.

Our winter squash crop was way better than last year but not nearly as good as '07. We have a new storage barn complete with radiant floor and blown on insulation. Our ultimate goal is to store and peel butternut until Easter, but we're far from that goal. Did a small experiment comparing different post harvest treatments. One was a chlorox treatment, one was an oxidate treatment, one was a dry field wash (we have great luck with cleaning squash in the field using nubbled gloves purchased from Gemplers), so far the experiment has been inconclusive, but we'll continue to experiment with different treatments. We also overwinter 30 pigs. We were able to procure cheap piglets off of Craig's list, slaughter dates are easier to get in the spring, and the freezers will be packed full of meat for the markets. Also pigs love all those seeds from the butternut peeling operation.

(Argyle, NY) Autumn has been great for extended growing on our farm; several plantings of broccoli, cauliflower, and cabbages that we thought weren't going to mature have been harvested over the past 2 weeks, most peaking this past week just in time for our biggest markets on the Saturday before Thanksgiving. We are currently harvesting from the fields: 4 types of cauliflowers, broccoli, red/green cabbage, leeks, Brussels sprouts, kale, Swiss chard, lettuce, mesclun, spinach, herbs, arugula, radishes, kohlrabis, and just did the last of the celery...and we have the root cellar crops (beets, carrots, potatoes, turnips, rutabagas) and winter squash and shallots. Thus, we have a huge diversity of product and our customer support has been wonderful for the winter markets.

Downy mildew has been a problem with some of the field lettuce, so we've made extra mesclun with the inner leaves. The coldest temperature we've had is about 25 degrees so we've been lucky (with rowcovers protecting a lot) but we will be moving the cabbage that matured and field lettuce to the root cellar soon. The crops in our two high tunnels (Fivestar lettuce for mesclun, Swiss chard, kale, arugula, spinach, Asian Greens, etc.) look good and will be ready soon for markets once the field crops are done. We enjoy this time of year for farm clean-up, equipment maintenance and storage, and we got the last of the cover crops down after the big harvests last week (and before more rains). We look forward to good winter conferences, starting with the New England Vegetable and Fruit Conference on Dec. 15-17 with lots of good farmer-to-farmer and regular sessions (see www.newenglandvfc.org/).

(Little Compton RI) Our winter market got off to a slow start this year. Last year was nothing short of meteoric increase in sales every week. I knew it wasn't sustainable. The economy in recession and competition from other winter markets have taken the wind out of our sails. Yet this pre-Thanksgiving Saturday beat all others. So go figure. We have taken to adding some extras to lure customers in: now we are juicing our extra sweet winter harvest carrots. People are shocked to find carrot juice so sweet and immediately they buy a 2# bag of carrots for \$3.50. We give out samples of the juice constantly but feel it is made up for in bulk carrot sales.

On the growing side, I have made a very unscientific decision that Bok Choy plants are the canary in the coal mine for seeing if you have aphids in the greenhouse. The last three winters they are always the first plants to get a real bad infestation. We similarly use yellow variegated sage for seeing if white fly is in our tomatoes. It works every time and much easier to use than yellow sticky cards. Damping off in our arugula is real bad; will try Oxidate drench. We again have cyclamen mites on our spinach. Saw some transplanted Hakuri turnips do real well in a friend's greenhouse.

Another first that has worked great is: we had some late planted rainbow chard and the plants never got that developed, so we gave them a haircut, plucked them out of the ground, and replanted in the greenhouse. They are doing great and took off like a rocket.

(Fairlee) Growing in low tunnels for the first time this year. We are using 10' electrical conduit as hoops. I bent them myself on our trailer without the bender, but Johnny's now has a bender. We cut 16" pieces of 1/2" rebar and drove them into the ground, leaving 4" above ground. Hoops go over the rebar and are firmly pressed down 3-4". Hoops are 42" high in the center and 54" wide, so there is plenty of room to crawl in and harvest. Covering with 4 mil 10' wide Tufflite from Johnny's. We are using this system over spinach, kale and chard and eager to see how long we can go into our winter markets with hearty greens. Right now everything continues to grow on under the plastic with this great late fall weather. Hoping also for some early harvest of spinach in March/April. We'll see how they hold snow. We are on 6' spacing between hoops, may need to shorten that depending on snow load. With reports of El Nino this year, though, snow could be scarce. We'll see...Just mulched our Tadorna leeks for winter digging with some seedless rye straw. We sure are thankful for finishing strong this fall after a rough late summer.

NEW BOOK ON PRACTICAL BUSINESS MANAGEMENT FOR VEGETABLE FARMS

Many of you know Richard Wiswall, of Cate Farm in Plainfield, and will be happy to learn that he's written a book called *The Organic Farmer's Business Handbook* in which he shares advice on how to make your vegetable production more efficient, better manage your employees and finances, and turn a profit. From his twenty-seven years of experience, Wiz knows firsthand the joys of starting and operating an organic farm—as well as the challenges of making a living from one. Farming offers fundamental satisfaction from producing food, working outdoors, being one's own boss, and working intimately with nature. But, unfortunately, many farmers avoid learning about the business end of farming; because of this, they often work harder than they need to, or quit farming altogether because of frustrating—and often avoidable—losses.

This book will be very useful to all kinds of vegetable farmers, not just organic producers. To order, ask for it at your local bookstore, or visit www.catefarm.com or www.chelseagreen.com.

ORGANIC TOMATO GROWER LATE BLIGHT SURVEY

If you grew or tried to grow tomatoes in 2009 and you used organic practices to do it, please take this survey to help improving our understanding of how to manage late blight.

NOFA/Mass is researching organic management strategies that farmers and gardeners used and how they affected the extent of late blight. The insights collected will be presented at the NOFA/Mass Winter Conference on January 16, 2010, in the Spring 2010 Edition of The Natural Farmer, and on the NOFA/Mass website. The goal is to improve our understanding of what organic growing practices for tomatoes were actually applied in 2009 and determine which strategies can be effective in managing the disease. We are seeking response from growers in MA, VT, CT, RI, NY, NJ, ME, NH, and PA. The survey deadline is January 1, 2010. Click on: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=7gWicbMRJAK9uhwb_2bBtdxw_3d_3d

A grant from Whole Foods Market supports this research project. If you have questions, contact Ben Grosscup, ben.grosscup@nofamass.org, 413-658-5374.