

## Vermont Vegetable and Berry News – February 17, 2009

Compiled by Vern Grubinger, University of Vermont Extension

(802) 257-7967 ext.13, [vernon.grubinger@uvm.edu](mailto:vernon.grubinger@uvm.edu)

[www.uvm.edu/vtvegandberry](http://www.uvm.edu/vtvegandberry)

### WINTER GROWER REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

(Montpelier) It's mid-February and the sun's intensity can be felt more in the greenhouses. Things are finally showing noticeable growth in both houses. I lost most of the minutina along one north wall; I'll plant spinach there next year instead. Spinach is looking great and so is the claytonia. Mache is starting to fill out. Chives are starting to send up new green shoots and they should be ready for the first March market along with thyme, sage and parsley, which are all under row cover in the greenhouse. Lola Rosa is filling in nicely. Have some very early plugs of sorrel as well as Oscarde and Ferrari lettuces that I am going to transplant this weekend into some open bed space. This week's warm weather is a real opportunity. I direct seeded about 50 feet of spinach into some open bed space. Hoping it will germinate soon and fill out by the end of March. Soil temperature is floating between 45-55 degrees depending on amount of sun. Starting to seed flats and trying to graft some tomatoes this year. Winter market is still very strong, some price resistance but not enough to adjust prices. Still selling out of salad, need to improve yields. I'm planning on trying two of the Arnold's field houses for spinach, kale and chard next winter.

(Westminster West) We're moving into strong headwinds from some of our bigger wholesale accounts. Hard to change growing plans but it seems like the sales growth we have experienced will slow down maybe even flat line. Sales of our less expensive items will do fine, vegetable packs and such. Fruit and vegetable sales should do fine as well. A few early aphids showing up hatching out from stock plants; that should keep the lady bugs we released happy! Already cleaned up the raspberry greenhouse house, will be applying compost soon.

(Starksboro) We've been in a couple of months of "all roots" and are expecting to have some greens from the high tunnel by mid-March. We're starting to run into pockets of white mold in stored carrots, which I suspect is due to some handling idiosyncracies back in November.

(Durham CT) All our greens are beginning to wake up to the longer days. Our house that is exclusively spinach has delivered us a whole new crop. We'll be attending our first winter market in two weeks. In the other houses, we have removed some of last fall's crop in anticipation of planting new. To avoid the possible weed pressure of new chickweed, we'll stale seedbed the area first. The other regrowth has been encouraging. Claytonia, kale, and baby bokchoi are incredibly beautiful and delicious. Hundreds of baby Bordeaux spinach plants are getting to ready to be transplanted in another week.

(Burlington) We're happy to see our second harvest of spinach reaching maturity now that the days are lengthening. Looks as though the downy mildew is under control, thanks to the DM resistance for races 1-10 now available in several spinach varieties. Starting our limited entry into the local wholesale market, now that we can see what won't need for the remaining month of our winter CSA share. We're installing our LDJ corn furnace and looking forward to reducing our propane bill this March and April.

(Little Compton RI) We are all done and have cleaned out every morsel of green leafy tissue out of the houses we used for winter production to get them ready for greenhouse tomatoes in three weeks. We are hopeful that this extra attention to cleaning will help with keeping away our last infestation of cyclamen mites in our winter spinach. They were on every leaf cluster in every greenhouse so they know how to get around. I will be investigating a trap crop to keep an eye out for them. I can't afford to let this happen again. On the subject of winter growing: we tried an Elliot Coleman idea of planting carrots in late September. We let them grow and then late November we covered them with row cover and an old large used 6 mil greenhouse plastic. If this works it will be better than trying to seed carrots in make-shift tunnels in April when the temperature and moisture are uneven; not to mention the extra strong wind storms that destroy such temporary greenhouses... Progress report will be forthcoming!

(Bath, MI) The recent warm weather here had us tricked into thinking Spring had actually sprung outside. As we know, it is already Spring in the tunnel. We cleaned up beds that had carrots, scallions, and arugula over the winter and reseeded more carrots and Hakurei turnips. We spent this weekend updating the seed inventory and ordering what we will need through the Summer months. Sales on Wednesday and Thursday included carrots, purple scallions, spinach, red Russian kale, arugula, and spicy salad mix (red giant mustard, baby arugula, Tokyo Bekana Chinese cabbage, red Russian kale, and mizuna, this week). We also finally cut out the polycarbonate that has been covering the shutters since the late fall and what a difference it makes with those working right! Tomatoes and peppers get seeded Feb.18th with plans to put them in the tunnel on April 15th.

(Argyle NY) After attending PASA and NOFA-VT and Elliot Coleman's day workshop, we are home to get back to serious growing and utilize some of the tips we learned. Elliot said that Feb 7th is the date when unheated tunnels start to show faster growth, and the explosion of growth in our 2 tunnels was very evident last week. We didn't have quite enough spinach to supply the demand for January, but that was due to seeding it late (Oct 12th). It should have been seeded Sept 25th to Oct 1st. and that week to 10 days was critical. We are now venting the tunnels and will try to keep them below 60-65 degrees during the days. The Asian greens will bolt soon if not kept real cool. Last year the customer attendance slumped in February, but this year, it continues to build, which correlates to the winter farmers having more product to meet the demand.

We are looking to seed Swiss chard, spinach, Asian greens, turnips, and broccoli raab this week in the greenhouse for April/May sales. We'll be direct seeding arugula, mesclun (5 Star Lettuce), radishes, and could do carrots if space! The scallions are up 1 inch in the greenhouse. In our tunnel, we have a mysterious critter that has chewed 20 row feet of our kale plants. Since we harvest once a week, the damage wasn't real noticeable at first and Paul thought it was a 4 legged critter, but over a few days, all leaves were stripped, just leaving the midribs on the plants! We are assuming it's a cutworm, but there is no sign AT ALL of any at this point. Maybe they just went through a whole cycle. We'll keep monitoring at all hours of the day. We know that Michigan had a real problem with the winter cutworm (*Noctua pronuba*), a huge cutworm which was devastating (more info at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Large\\_Yellow\\_Underwing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Large_Yellow_Underwing)). Anyway, nice to see the driveways, the greenhouse automatic ridge vent open, and seeds germinating for another fun season!

## **THANK YOU, EXTENSION SUPPORTERS!**

I am very grateful for your donations, large and small, and the letters of support sent in response to my request that growers help University of Vermont Extension deal with budget challenges. Gifts in any amount are appreciated and they send a statement that you value Extension. They're tax deductible, too. Make checks to 'Extension Vegetable and Berry Gift Fund' and send to: Kurt Reichelt, Development Officer, UVM Extension, 19 Roosevelt Highway, Colchester VT 05446.

## **TESTING POTTING MIX (GREENHOUSE MEDIA)**

Remember to test your potting soil and/or compost-amended greenhouse beds sooner rather than later. Do not use a standard field soil test, but rather, the Saturated Media Extract Test, also called greenhouse media test. This test includes soluble salts, available nitrate and ammonium, as well as pH and water-extractable nutrient levels. It is relatively inexpensive compared to the cost of poor crops growth that can occur if your mix has problems.

Bruce Hoskins, who runs the soil lab at the University of Maine, offers this advice: Plan ahead to testing any fresh mix, whether commercial or homemade, otherwise results can be misleading, since the ingredients are usually blended dry. In that state, the pH and salt level can be radically different than after it has been in the pot or flat for awhile. The mix really needs to be potted up, wet down thoroughly as you would for planting, allowed to drain, and incubated at room temperature for at least a week before testing. At least some of any excess salt content is flushed out when the mix is initially wet up and drained. Dry lime will not react until the soil is wet up and incubated. It is difficult for some folks to wait for the mix to incubate - especially if time is short - but it gives a much more realistic picture of actual growing conditions while it is in use.

The University of Maine Soil Testing Lab runs the greenhouse media analysis for \$15/sample with a 2 working day turnaround. They also offer a greenhouse irrigation quality water analysis for \$25 which includes full mineral analysis, alkalinity (hardness), pH, and conductivity. Water analysis also takes about 2 working days. Every year some growers with hard water have problems affecting high-pH sensitive plants (petunias, pansies, snapdragons, and calibrachoa for instance), especially if they are held over. For more information see: <http://anlab.umesci.maine.edu/> or call (207) 581-3591. The University of Mass soil testing lab also offers the greenhouse media test for \$10 and water testing for \$26, but contact the lab before submitting water samples. See: [www.umass.edu/plsoils/soiltest/](http://www.umass.edu/plsoils/soiltest/) or call (413) 545-2311.

## **STRAWBERRY VARIETY UPDATE**

David Handley, UMaine Cooperative Extension, presented the results of his strawberry variety trials from 2003-2008 in central Maine at the recent Vermont Vegetable and Berry Growers Assn. annual meeting. His current recommendations: Early: Sable, Wendy, Annapolis, Honeoye. Early Mid-season: Brunswick, Cavendish, Itasca? Mid-Season: Jewel, Mesabi, Mira, Darselect. Late: Cabot, Allstar, Clancy, Ovation? Yamaska? For more data on variety performance and characteristics, see his slide show on line, or call me for a copy of the handout.

All talks from the recent VT Vegetable and Berry Growers Annual meeting are in pdf format at <http://www.uvm.edu/vtvegandberry/proceedingslinks.html>, scroll down to the bottom of the page.

## **CENSUS OF AG SHOWS HORTICULTURE BOOM IN VT**

The 2007 Census of Agriculture, at [www.agcensus.usda.gov](http://www.agcensus.usda.gov), reports that the number of all farms in Vermont went up from 6,571 to 6,984 (+6.3%) since 2002. During that period, the number of farms selling vegetables, potatoes and melons went up from 422 to 506 (+20%). Sales from those farms went from \$10.1 to \$13.2 million (+30%). From 2002-2007, farms selling blueberries went from 119 to 230 (+93%), strawberry farms went from 90 to 122 (+35%) and raspberry farms went from 80 to 142 (+77%). Farm selling currants went from 1 farm to 15. The sales of all fruits, tree nuts and berries went from \$9.3 million to \$15.9 million (+71%). New this Census is a measure of greenhouse tomatoes: 98 Vermont farms sold \$2.9 million of them; 58 farms sold \$1 million of other greenhouse vegetables and herbs. Bedding/garden plants were sold at 203 farms for \$12 million.