



Vermont Vegetable and Berry News – February 17, 2015
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REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

(Shelburne/South Burlington) Despite the warm Nov/Dec this stretch of well-below normal temperatures is going to make for interesting regrowth under the hoops. The kale, surprisingly, looks good. We will see how this coldest weather yet treats them. The spinach is more troubling looking. I am confident that any damaged leaves will just be removed and the plants will eventually regrow well, but it's hard to tell at this point. I have a lot more visual freeze damage than in years past. I am still not working beds yet. Usually I plant a new round of kale, lettuce, cilantro, escarole and other crops in a week! Not going to happen this year with these temperatures. Luckily we had a bountiful Nov. and Dec., and even beginning of January before things got so cold. I have been wondering what greenhouses in Massachusetts look like with all the snow. When I lived in Michigan, some areas of the state near the lake would get an accumulation of 4 to 6 feet of snow, and the hoophouses did just fine as long as the snow load was evenly spread out, so I have been curious to know how farms with greenhouses are handling the snow load. We are definitely appreciating the longer days, and even though it was still quite cold, the sun in the last few days was able to warm up the houses enough to slough off the 3 to 6 inches of snow that had built up on the houses after that freak sleet/rain we had (even though air temperatures were only about 3 degrees!). The sleet had created a nice ice layer on the houses and then the next snowfall all stuck right on. Happy to see it slide off on its own!

(Huntington) Local wholesale markets have been steady. It seemed like there was a whole lot of product put up on many farms going into winter, but it seems to be moving at this point. Winter farmers' markets have been somewhat disappointing in 2015, but below-zero temperatures on those Saturdays probably hasn't helped casual foot traffic. Plowing in semi-weekly 2 degree snow storms has me dreaming of a cab on the utility tractor, but I take as consolation that this wasn't the winter we dove head-first into winter greens production. We're nearing the end of an insulation project in our shop, so that is a pretty good bet that a warm-up is imminent. We will be clearing out a room in the storage barn in the next two weeks to take advantage of the radiant floor to germinate our onion flats prior to turning on the greenhouse. We started doing that last year and had germination in 4 days on a 75-degree slab.

(Grand Isle) Very cold, we are happy there is a good amount of snow insulating the strawberries. Rounding up wood pellets for opening the propagation greenhouse in early March. Cheapest we have found is \$239 a ton, but limited availability. Should have stocked up in the early winter! We are trying out some vole traps in our empty high tunnels, as described in Eliot Coleman's 'The Winter Harvest Handbook.' They are simple rectangular wooden boxes with removable lids, and space for two spring loaded traps inside. We cut a small vole hole into the bottom corner on two opposite sides for the voles to get in and get out. The vole/mouse natural instinct is to scurry into a small dark hole, and once there they walk into the trap as they try to go out the opposite side. We've caught five so far without even baiting the traps, a successful trial. Looking forward to putting them to expanded use once transplants start to go out in the early Spring. Also, we set up a new invoicing system to use for 2015, with waveapps.com. It's a free web-based invoicing solution, and looks like it will fill our needs. Most importantly, you can export all your data periodically so you aren't relying on one free service to save it all for future reference.

(Elmore) Wading through chest-high light fluffy snow to check deer fences and carry boxes of tools and handouts to winter shows. Not too many deer tracks, hopefully due to time put in patching and strengthening our perimeter fence. We made a lot of spreadable fruit jam and now taking it on the road to stores, the NOFA conference, the flower show. Our jam won 3 ribbons including 'best of class' at the farm show. This feels good for all our effort and originality. Sometimes it seems buyers don't care about local organic anymore, just price or what sells the fastest. But then people stop you on the street and say: "Wow, I can't eat any of other jam, only yours." This gives us strength for another season. We're busy looking at inventory software for keeping track of all we grow, what we need to grow more or less of, and what we need to order for our production season. It is challenging not to know what fruit trees are alive or not, because it has been so cold for so long. Compare this to a shopkeeper, who knows what's on the shelf, ready to sell. Meeting with crew to plan for the season and focusing on 'keep it simple and true to the pathway that has heart.' To us this means not trying to do everything, but remembering we started farming to make the world a little better, a little kinder and we saw that we could do this in our own way, one row and one day at a time.

(Westminster West) Definitely a throwback winter! We have two greenhouses running now and thanks to all the snow piled around the house, they are snug and staying warm without too much fuel. Today I started pricking out the first crop of tomatoes for grafting next month. Onions and leeks are popping up in packs and herbs and lettuce is almost ready for transplanting. We have extra 128's of kale and lettuce and I will do a list serve message for those soon. Response to listing for our own grafts for sale has been tremendous and we increased production to meet the demand. Still working on finalizing field plans for veggies, I like to work it out in my head first before committing it to paper, eh I mean computer! Meeting with buyers and working it all out.

Almost all our staff are returning once again this year, I guess this isn't too terrible a place to work! A few new faces that need to get some training, not my most favorite part of the job but important to get people started on the right foot. After buying lots of new equipment the last few years I'm cutting back the spending to a bare minimum and focusing on building maintenance and some new product development. I enjoyed attending the NOFA winter conference in Burlington and once again enjoyed our Governor's good natured ribbing but I must add that I was not a founder of NOFA, I was only there at the birth by luck and somehow I'm still here, so I'm tenacious if nothing else. Spring is just weeks away and although it's hard to believe, all this snow will be gone in 6 weeks and crocuses will be flowering on my front lawn!

(Ange-Gardien, Quebec) Everything is frozen solid in the greenhouse, will see what survives in the spring. Planning is almost completed. I try to push further the concept of double and triple cropping in the greenhouse. The effort in finding little-used machinery treasure should pay off anytime soon.

(Plainfield NH) Tomato grafting 2015 has commenced, but that is not the big news on our farm. Snow removal is the featured lifestyle at the moment, and trying to survive frostbite while doing it. Because ten of our greenhouses have been nestled in a limited area, they fit only 2 feet apart, sidewall to sidewall. This, according to Ed Person is not a good way to set up greenhouses, and I agree, but that is how it worked out. So we plow the gable ends and then melt the snow off the poly. In recent cold storm events we wait until a sunny day after the storm to do that, and there is some tedious work between the sidewalls to assist the snow totally off the hipboards. At this time of the year the sun helps melt the snow off the tops and sidewalls, but those tops have to be clear enough to capture the sun. In warmer storms where temps are between 20 and 40F, we turn the heat up to melt snow at the beginning of the event. Getting a feel for snow density is important. The kind of powder that we have been getting up to this point can mount up to 2 feet on a house without much concern, but I have come close to collapsing greenhouses with 3 inches of white sludge in an April storm. All snow is not created equal. The point is always be prepared for the next event before it lands at your farm. This winter has taken a toll already on greenhouses in MA and CT, and a NH grower lost 2 tunnels this winter. (Editor's note: see www.uvm.edu/vtvegandberry/factsheets/PreventGreenhouseCollapse.html)

(Little Compton RI) Coolbot warning! During the first storm our Coolbot was on to keep our carrot storage down to 33 degrees. With all the blowing snow and wind, a bunch of snow got into the side fins of our GE a/c and an ice dam got going next to the fan blades and that burned up the motor. Now I know to turn the unit off during snowy, blowing weather.

Our heat systems and greenhouse designs are just not a match to the slings and arrows of this season's storms! Next season we will insulate some benches with 1.5 inches of styrofoam, put hydronic heat mats down and top it off with some electric conduit ribs covered with Agribon 30 so in effect we will have mini greenhouses. Our goal is to keep everything warm and not worry about the overall air temperature of the entire house. Regarding grafting, a big lesson this year was to consider the extra drying effect of the continuous bottom heat needed to keep them warm. Our plugs were not growing because the bottoms of the plug cells got too dry for root growth. So for the last couple of weeks we've watered everything very thoroughly, then we push up random plugs to be sure the water got down to the bottom. Not having a well-rooted Maxifort plug probably led to failure of some grafts. Another wakeup call was finding out our Therm-alarm unit had slight oxidation on the contacts. One we checked had been in place 12 years and wasn't working. We took some emery cloth and a touch of vinegar to clean them up; another idea is to get a tube of some anti-oxidation lubricant that electricians use when setting up an electric panel in a moist environment...like a greenhouse!

(Argyle NY) This winter is bearing down hard. Our winter greens production in our unheated houses has been minimal, though I noticed the spinach under one layer of row cover has started to grow again. May be some harvest this week. Our two tunnels with underground heat had less than usual production in January, due to lack of sun in Dec. and first two weeks of Jan., but with more sunny days production is almost back to market demand now. Starting to clean up beds and replant the first fall plantings now. With heated soil emergence is about a week at mid-Feb. light levels. With our minimally heated soils, production is more about sunlight levels than outdoor temperature. Lately, this is the only time of year we can retail a significant amount of salad greens. I have noticed a falling off of demand for greens at our farmers' market due I think to falling prices as organic production from out west reaches the economies of scale of conventional. Three new stores (and many existing supermarkets) in our area feature organic greens, plus home and workplace delivery services. Time for a new way of retailing. We are teaming up other local farms selling yogurt, eggs, apples, and vegetables to create a farmer-owned delivery service in our area.

(Enfield NH) Clearing snow and planning for the 2015 season. Looking at changing how we seed and cultivate our beds and other field setup practices. Will start seeding onions and shallots in about 3 weeks.