



Vermont Vegetable and Berry News – March 1, 2021

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LAST CHANCE TO GIVE FEEDBACK ON THIS NEWSLETTER

Fill out this [5-minute survey](#) to let me know how well you are served by the VT veg and berry news, and the VVBGA listserv, if you are on it. The survey ends tomorrow night, March 2.

TWO DOZEN PRACTICES TO CONSIDER DOING THIS YEAR

Here's a list of some "best practices" you might already be implementing, have been meaning to do, or... don't even want to think about. This isn't meant to overwhelm you, but to provide reminders of things you may want to act on. The list is not in priority order, and is kind of random...send me your ideas on topics I should have included!

1. Add *Trichoderma* and/or other [biofungicides to your potting mix](#). Many of these are low cost, essentially non-toxic, and they can help prevent diseases that cause damping off. Depending on the label, they can be incorporated in the mix ahead of time, or applied as a drench to established transplants.
2. Calculate the cost of your field fertilizer options. Becky Maden developed spreadsheets to help you select the lowest-cost soil amendments to meet the nutrient application rates you've identified, based on crops and soil test results. The spreadsheets and related information are on [this page](#).
3. Call a technician to service greenhouse heating systems. Making sure your furnaces, boilers, etc. are in optimal condition can save money by improving their efficiency, and avoid potential problems such as heating failures or ethylene damage due to combustion gases getting into the greenhouse. For more information, see this [fact sheet from Virginia Tech](#) and this [fact sheet from UMass](#) focused on gas and oil furnaces.
4. Clean up your surfaces. Do you have wooden walls, or other hard-to-clean-surfaces in places where produce or other food is handled? This UVM Extension Ag Engineering [blog post on smooth and cleanable surfaces](#) provides a summary of some finish surface materials, their pros, cons and prices.
5. Develop an employee handbook. This is not as hard as it sounds, and there are many potential benefits of being on the same page with your employees. Use this [personnel policy generator](#) to edit pre-existing text that makes it super easy for farms to generate your own employee handbook. If you need a good example, here's the [Lewis Creek Farm Employee Handbook](#) posted on-line by Hank Bissell and shared without permission. Thanks Hank!

6. E-mail pictures of plant problems for diagnosis. The pandemic has increased use of this option, and the UVM Plant Diagnostic Clinic is super-responsive to commercial grower submissions. Images can be shared with other experts, as needed, to facilitate accurate diagnosis. Here are some [tips for submitting a 'digital sample' to plant disease diagnostic lab](#). A live sample may eventually be needed, but you can save time by send the right kind of images first.
7. Get customer feedback. Set up a consistent way to learn what your customers like and don't like. This can be as simple as providing feedback forms and a collection box at your retail market, or you could conduct an e-mail survey to your customer list. Keep the questions short and focused on things you can respond to (change).
8. Increase your drip irrigation. In high tunnels or in the field, the entire root zone of crops may not be fully wetted if there are not enough drip lines, especially during droughty periods. This is most likely an issue in light-textured, sandy soils, where water tends to move down rather than sideways. [This article](#) has a couple of good images showing water movement over time in different textured soils.
9. Install monitoring systems – at least for greenhouse temperature, and maybe much more. A simple temperature alarm can save you a bundle if the heat goes out, or vents aren't open when they should be. Keeping tabs on vegetable storage conditions is a good idea, too. Here's some information from UVM Ag Engineering about [monitoring options on the farm](#).
10. Invest in good rain gear and neoprene gloves. In response to VVBGA listserv queries in recent years, Grunden or Helly Hansen were popular rain gear products, and Ice Bay Glacier gloves were a favorite. (You can search the [listserv archives](#) to see the all the grower recommendations.)
11. Join the VVBGA. Want access to all the grower knowledge that's shared on the grower listerv? Want to use the CAPS templates to write a produce safety plan? Or maybe organize your soil test and fertilizer application records? Go to [vvbga.org](#) and sign up today.
12. Monitor spray coverage by using water sensitive cards. If you apply pesticides, organic or conventional, good coverage is important. Here's [an article with images](#) that shows how these cards can help you assess coverage. Here's a [video](#) with a lot more information.
13. Mount HAF fans in high tunnels (especially for trellised tomatoes, which block air movement). The fans create a more uniform temperature by reducing stratification, can reduce disease problems by avoiding condensation on leaves, and can help maintain higher carbon dioxide levels around the leaves. Proper selection and installation of HAF fans is important; see [this article](#) for details.
14. Net some of your blueberry or raspberry crop. A good way to estimate what your losses to birds are is to cover a part of your planting for comparison. Using insect netting can give you protection from both birds and SWD. Growers are experimenting with a variety of netting systems to protect their crops. Here's a collection of [bird netting images](#) on brambles and blueberries.

15. Order *Trichogramma ostriniae* for European corn borer control. This miniature wasp seeks out ECB egg masses and parasitizes them, killing them before they hatch. This beneficial insect is produced on demand by [IPM Labs in NY](#), so you need to call them when you plant your sweet corn to place your order.
16. Plan some down time. Take regular work breaks, and get away from the farm, even for a day or two. There is a lot of evidence that these practices are good for well-being and productivity, for business owners and employees. But if you don't plan ahead, they may not happen.
17. Prune your blueberries properly. That means every year if possible, while still dormant, removing old canes and weak growth. This [6-minute video from UMaine](#) shows you how. If a planting is old and has not been pruned much at all, consider [renovation](#) for some or all of it (cutting down to the ground) to allow new canes to flourish.
18. "Stack" your weed cultivation tools. Using several different cultivation implements at once can improve weed control, especially tools that work synergistically together, to undercut, then uproot, then bury weeds. [Research by Bryan Brown](#) in NY found that sweeps plus fingers plus disk hillers consistently provided good weed control in beans and beets.
19. Take the certified pesticide applicator exam this year. If you use conventional or organic pesticides on a commercial farm you probably need to be licensed. Here's the "[Do I need to be certified?](#)" chart to know for sure. The Agency of Agriculture administers [VT pesticide applicator exams](#) and schedules them. Here are [resources to help you study for the exam](#).
20. Track labor time on key crops and tasks. OK I know this is not simple. But there are some tools to help you get a general handle on this. See the short and long forms for worker time reporting developed by [Veggie Compass](#). There's also a crop labor estimation workbook on this site. Compass Tools are free downloadable spreadsheets created at the Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems, University of Wisconsin-Madison
21. Expand your use of cover crops. Check out the brand new [Cover Crop Decision Tool](#) for the Northeast to select different covers best suited to different conditions, and to learn more about each cover crop. Here's a list of [places to purchase cover crop seed](#).
22. Use the correct soil test for established high tunnels. Once you have amended the soil for several years, we recommend that you use the "Long Term/Combined High Tunnel Package" offered by the [UMaine soil test lab](#). This includes the Basic High Tunnel Test (modified Morgan's extract, like a field soil test) PLUS the Saturated Media Extract (potting soil test) for all major and micronutrients. The results report both season-long nutrient availability and short-term nutrient intensity.
23. Validate your crew. [Create a culture of encouragement](#). Buy doughnuts every Monday. Catch people doing something right. Leave notes of appreciation. Do some 'affirmations' in weekly meetings about what is going well. Celebrate once in a while.

24. Visit the new UVM vegetable and berry (and tree fruit) [web site](#). The links should all work now so check out the resources! In particular I hope this compilation of [commercial crop production guides](#) will be useful to you.

OK, next month it's back to our usual reports from the field format before I go too far off the rails.

UPCOMING WEBINARS

March 3 and 10. [Soil Health Workshops for Vegetable Growers](#). 8:30-10:00 am

March 4. [Northeast Cover Crops Conference](#)

March 9. [Organic Management of Spotted-Wing Drosophila](#). 2:00 pm

March 16, 23 and 30. [Farm Succession and Transfer Webinar Series](#). 11:00 am – 1:00 pm

RECORDED WEBINAR SERIES

[eOrganic Fruit Production Webinars](#)

[eOrganic Vegetable Production Webinars](#)

[New England High Tunnel Conference](#)

[UMass Virtual Vegetable Twilight Meetings](#)

[UVM Vegetable and Berry Grower Webinars](#)