

Vermont Vegetable and Berry News – March 23, 2010

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REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

(Royalton) After ten year we found out late that we no longer would have access to the propagation house we use to grow seedlings and field plants. Time to get our own; for this season, nearby Luna Bleu Farm has graciously allowed us to start our seeds there, so planted peppers, eggplants and some lettuce for the field. In our hoophouses, kale, lettuce, arugula, radishes, spinach are all going strong. Planted carrots, radishes, more greens. The peas are up two inches high; continuing to harvest arugula, kale, chard, parsley, mustard straight out of the field. The head lettuce under row cover planted last fall is growing. Garlic is three inches out of the ground. There was a cabbage butterfly flying around yesterday. Still not convinced we aren't going to get a huge Nor'easter in April. All the ewes and their lambs are outside soaking up this glorious sun.

(Plainfield) Early melt off of the snow is strange. Weatherman said that we have had 36 days of above average temperatures as of March 17. Nice in the greenhouse, low fuel consumption with all this sunshine. I am about 1 week ahead of schedule in my seedings, as I wanted to take advantage of all the free heat. Onions, leeks, lettuce mix and braising mix are up and doing well. Parsley, celery and celeriac starting to germinate. Been eating overwintered spinach from a small planting in one unheated greenhouse since March 1st. This coming fall I need to get the tomatoes out of the greenhouses earlier to make way for more of this easy crop. Lots of cleaning up and organizing to do before the real growing season gets here. I hope to leave the mulch on the strawberries until at least the 3rd week of April.

(Moretown) In the unheated tunnel, the spinach, mesclun and transplanted red leaf lettuce are all loving the (unusually) early spring. Radishes and salad turnips have germinated nicely. The melting snow from the greenhouse roof slides has created a bit of a flooding problem in the greenhouse and had to make a channel through 6 of the beds for the water to flow through to the other side and out under the running board. One of many challenges of having a farm on and surrounded by hills.

(Randolph Center) During these frozen mornings we're cutting back hedgerows around our fields to maximize acreage and sunlight. We've lined up an excavator to install drain tile into some historically wet spots. The input costs and potential gross dollars per acre for vegetables vs. other row crops makes the economics of these projects seem much more within reach.

(Montpelier) March has come in like a lamb around here. Things are way ahead of schedule in the greenhouses. Having to pull out some over wintered plants due to bolting. Usually don't have to do that until late April with some of the Brassicas. Getting an early start on cleaning the fields up and trying to get a few projects finished that winter put on hold. Seeing some flea beetle damage in the spinach but nothing compared to years past. A few aphids in the spinach but harvesting will take care of them. It will be very interesting to see what the season brings in the way of rain this year. New drainage is in place along the interior perimeter of the greenhouses and I have already seen a big improvement in growing climate.

(West Rutland) Now this is a nice way to get into spring. High 20s at night, not a lot of wind, good amount of sunshine and a big pile of wood. Yeah it's greenhouse time again and the heatin' is easy, at the moment. I do get nervous about the garlic sprouting early and getting nuked by a hard freeze, but it all looks good at this time. The snow is gone, so I have no varmit report at this time. That means lack of tracks fer you newbees.

(Burlington) Global warming feels good! We are 3/4 through the blueberry pruning and ready to cover the strawberry hoopouses this weekend with the help of Green Mountain Crop Mob.

(Little Compton RI) We are having one of the nicest runs of warm March weather in many years. After a hard winter the bees are loving getting down to business on the daffodils. A week ago we had horizontal rain and 65 mph gusts for two days. A lot of damage to roofs and a couple of greenhouses had some plastic split on the peak seams. All of which makes me reflect on the NRCS Nationwide High Tunnel program. It seems like they are mainly interested in offering these tunnels to relatively new farmers who may not be fully aware of the stress put on structures that are well heeled to the ground let alone any movable houses. All interested in these tunnels should checkout the Growing for Market issue about just this subject. Another subject: We bought the Schaper Bros. five foot fertilizer drop spreader to exclusively put down our dusty organic fertilizers. What a nice change from jammed up side dressers and spin spreaders leaving you in a cloud of dusty chicken poop. They come with shut off clips and drop tubes and high clearance steel wheels that give you over 28" clearance.

(Westminster West) Here we go! Starting to deliver Pansy's and herbs to local stores and some not so local stores as well. Someone actually asked for tomato plants already! The sunshine has been much appreciated as its cheaper to vent then to heat the greenhouses. Finally hired a bug and disease scouter so I don't have way too many hats to wear. Finally found a good bio-control control for Western flower Thrips as well, if your interested please email me for details prussack@gmail.com. Severe push back on any price increases on our products from stores so I guess there won't be any increases this year; there is a recession still going on. Increasing mechanization, both pot filling and watering chores, so maybe we can cap our costs as well. Biting the bullet and applying for GAP certification, only because Hannafords insists. I will keep you folks posted on how it goes. Cover crop news: the thickly seeded oats and cow pea mix has emerged as an amazing blanket of protection totally covering the field from rain and snow erosion. This appears to be much more protection than the emerging winter rye is providing at this time. The winter killed oat and peas will be an easy till as well, no plowing under necessary.

(Shaftsbury) Cut down our fall raspberries and the canes were already starting to break bud; seems early. Our late seeded winter rye seemed to have some winter kill. Greenhouse bedding plants are beginning to get geared up in earnest. We installed a (supposedly) 200,000 Btu (input) corn boiler from American Royal with piping to 2 greenhouses. After some start up issues it seems to be doing pretty well, but heating up water to heat air, instead of just the air with a furnace, seems to make for a slower heat recovery with corn than a fossil fuels. So by morning on colder nights the boiler water temp is relatively low, and the propane backup is kicking in, which is a 175,000 that has no problem keeping the house warm by itself.

(Plainfield NH) Life is pretty good when you can get an afternoon of spring skiing in on Friday and get some manure spread and spaded in on Saturday. In the greenhouses lots of perennial and annual transplanting. Having difficulty getting mealy bugs under wraps on overwintered ornamental grasses. Is there a better beneficial or biorational control out there than *Cryptolaemus*? If so please let me know ps@edgewaterfarm.com. Otherwise, WF and thrips counts seem to be managed with Botanigard, Pyganic and predatory beneficials. Outside we have finished pruning the blues and raspberries. The peach buds are swollen up, so don't know if I am even going to prune. I am betting on the weather wacking them if they are this advanced in March. In fact, Bill Lord (UNH Fruit Specialist Emeritus) advised me not to uncover strawberries until next weekend, but then I found lupines and delphiniums emerging from the cut flower beds. Pretty interesting year. Spinach overwintered nicely and all the fields are looking forward to this week's rain.

WHEN SHOULD STRAW MULCH BE REMOVED FROM STRAWBERRIES?

Research has shown that straw should be removed soon after snow melts and the danger of severe cold temperatures is past. Usually this is late March in New York State. The additional light that the plants receive in early spring is extremely beneficial for growth and productivity. Growers concerned about cold temperatures can use a rowcover to protect plants after the straw mulch is removed. In Vermont, research (by Dr. Bertie Boyce, former UVM fruit specialist) removed straw in mid-March, mid-April and mid-May in each of 3 years. In each year, yields were highest with the earliest straw removal date. Similar results were obtained in New York. (Marvin Pritts, Cornell University)

TEST YOUR GREENHOUSE SOILS

Remember to test your potting soil and/or compost-amended greenhouse soils. Do not use a standard field soil test; use 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 sub-optimal crop growth. Make sure your mix or soil has been moist and warm (room temperature) for at least a week before testing. Send at least one pint to the soil test lab; UMaine (207) 581-3591 <http://anlab.umesci.maine.edu/> or UMass (413) 545-2311 www.umass.edu/plsoils/soiltest, conduct this test for \$15; put my e-mail at the bottom of the submission form so I can provide recommendations.

SPRING PLANTED MUSTARD COVER CROPS

Adapted from Thomas Bjorkman, Horticultural Sciences, NYSAES, Cornell - Geneva

Spring planted crucifer cover crops can contribute active organic matter and suppress both weeds and soilborne disease. They are one of the few spring-sown covers that is done before vegetables are planted in early June. There has been recent attention to using yellow mustard for this purpose because it is inexpensive and grows particularly well in the cold spring weather. It can be frost seeded (bit too late for that this year) if the ground dries enough, or sown in mid-April. May gives more planting opportunities, but that was definitely too late to plant yellow mustard in Geneva NY.

Mustard can be sown with a Brillion-type grass seeder, which drops the seed into soil cracks and then firms the soil around the seed; broadcasting is not satisfactory because there is no seed-soil contact.

Another option is scoring the soil surface to with an Aerway, then applying liquid manure with mustard in it. Again seed-soil is the key. Mustards will grow much better if there is nitrogen available to them. If all the soil nitrogen has been lost over the winter, the plants will be quite small. It's better to choose fields that will have some residual nitrogen or to use the slurry manure method. Ten pounds per acre is a reasonable seeding rate. Many crucifer cover crops are self-suppressing, so higher seeding rates may produce weaker stands. It's better to do a good job with less seed. Mustard cover crops are easily killed by tillage. Be sure not to let seeds form, because there will be volunteers. The plants will put out a yellow caution sign with flowering to remind you that it is time to control them. Feel the base of the earliest flowers across the field. As long as it's still very soft there seed won't be produced. Once you can feel the hard seed at the base of the flower it's too late to avoid seed set but incorporate the crop immediately. Spring planted mustards are typically incorporated in late May.

There are several precautions to avoid crop suppression after this cover crop. First, allow a week or two for them to decompose before planting your vegetable crop. Second is to avoid incompatible vegetable. Other crucifers, like cabbage, cauliflower and broccoli are susceptible to any diseases that grew on the cover crop roots. Cucurbits, like cucumber, melon and pumpkins have been suppressed in some of our trials, so we're not recommending that sequence until we know more. Information on cover crops suited to New York vegetable production, including where to buy the seed, is available from Cornell at <http://www.covercrop.net>.