



Vermont Vegetable and Berry News – March 4, 2024
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REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

(Orwell) We are getting tunnels ready for spring and summer production; taking a little breather from winter greens has given us the headspace to feel more organized heading into spring. We've been working to build fertility in dormant tunnels through additions of farm-made compost and cover crops and are excited to get planting into improved soil.

Small systems improvements include installing a more sophisticated greenhouse controller in our prop house (thanks to Chris Callahan for helping to trouble shoot this) and partially rebuilding an older tunnel. Recent winds have convinced us that we really need to invest in a generator--at our small scale, we've always scrapped by with manual backup systems, but when the wind whips all night, it would be nice to sleep without so much anxiety.

Other stresses include dreaded aphids already appearing (the temptation to keep a few beds of kale and spinach for personal consumption overwhelms logic) but we hope to control them before they jump to tomatoes. March's longer days mean the season is rolling and we are in for another wild ride, hopefully it is a more positive one for our grower community than last year.

(Dummerston) The mild winter has been great for high tunnel greens, but most are looking a bit tired now. Asian greens are starting to bolt. Downy mildew is starting in the spinach. I plan to increase plant spacing a bit next year to try to reduce bottom rot on the bok choy and others. But in a cold year it might not matter. That seems to be the tradeoff: in a warmer year there's more growth and less cold injury but more disease. I'm looking forward to the end of mud season so I can get to work outdoors.

(Guildhall) After strong holiday sales and an unusually busy January, February's sales were lackluster. A few solid shop projects have been seen to (spray coupes and potato trucks), and the slog that is bookkeeping this time of year. Potatoes are keeping well enough, but some varieties are starting to look their age.

(E. Wallingford) Most of the snow has melted this week. Time to start pruning blueberries and finish mulching blueberries. Has not gone below zero this winter yet. Buds on blueberries and new peach trees look good so far. Picked up irrigation system for frost control and flail mower to grind up brush. No more hand picking and burning of brush from pruning.

(Putney) We have our new tomato grafting speed record of 260 in one hour.

(Ange-Gardien, Quebec) Very bad winter for backcountry skiing, very good winter for crops. Seems like this will be a “normal” winter in 20 years. Better get use to it and try to seize opportunities.

Things get more complex: supply chains break (shortage), inflation, necessity to open account to deal with new suppliers, price negotiation, transport logistics, etc. A lot more administration and energy this year for the same results: get my stuff in time for production. Is it better to have material in stock or to order in the last minute (cashflow)?

Trying to include new shareholders in the business: wow! Very interesting and complex process. I need to know what I want to do in 20 years from now!

Crops look good and we sold in advance a lot of vegetables which allow us plan ahead: now it is time to deliver the veggies.

(Plainfield NH) We are as befuddled as any of you as to what to do with the weather. And looking at the weather next week I am glad I don't have a lot invested in maple sugaring. I spread some compost on the 25th of February. And 30 years ago, I would have 4 weeks of ski patrolling left before I got back full time on the farm. But I think we are just going to stay calm and just go with the old planting schedule.

Help is starting to trickle back in, labor housing inspection has happened, and tomato grafting is well underway. The rooted liners are now showing up and transplanting has begun in earnest as the perennial and annuals seeding are starting to mature to transplant stage.

We have no new strategies or expansions before us, but we have continued to invest in automatic roll up greenhouse sides as a time saving device. Much of the building repair and machine maintenance has wrapped up and we feel we are pretty much ready to get underway.

(Little Compton RI) Winter market in Providence doing very well. Food Hub in the city got amazing funding to put up 4 million dollar building housing with five other local businesses supporting local ag. It has six 30-foot-wide hallways allowing winter vendors plenty of room to line both sides and yet have plenty of room for shoppers five abreast to walk around. Also, had the forethought to have 75 car parking spaces. We have been surprised that more of the farmers there are just not offering more winter vegetables. We have done well. And the only problems are voles who go after bok choy and escaroles.

Had a bad start to grafting this winter, with too much humidity from our Vic's cold steamers. Also, poor germination. Have heard others having a poor year due to dampening off. We are using Oxidate and Double Nickel to help stem the tide.

An NRCS program buying old inefficient diesel tractors is a real deal but competitive. Check it out. (Editor's note: the “combustion system improvement practice” is [conservation practice standard 372](#) offered by NRCS through the [Environmental Quality Incentives Program or EQIP](#)).

Shocked over truck and general vehicle insurance increases. Could be a game changer!

HIGH TUNNEL SOIL TESTING

[This fact sheet](#) explains what type of test to use and how to sample properly. This fact sheet explains what type of test to use and how to sample properly. For established high tunnels growing in the ground we recommend using the University of Maine Soil Test Lab's Long Term Combined High Tunnel Package for \$30 per sample. This includes the Basic High Tunnel Test PLUS Saturated Media Extract for all major and micronutrients. Results show both season-long nutrient availability and short-term nutrient intensity.

TECH TIPS FROM [UVM EXTENSION AG ENGINEERING](#)

by Chris Callahan and Andy Chamberlin

Spring into action with these seasonal guides. Take a look at what others are doing with germination and start chambers and go down the technical rabbit hole with Chris in [our germ chamber guide](#). As you start-up prop houses and tunnels take some time to do a [quick safety check on your heaters](#) to prevent problems ([like this flame roll out](#)) down the road. Speaking of which, we've heard a lot of interest in monitoring options from low to high tech. You may want to check out our [summary of available remote monitoring options](#). Are your walk-ins getting bare or empty? May be a great time to [do a deep clean and spring cooler check](#) to make sure you are ready to keep the season's bounty clean and cool.

A [Produce Safety Alliance \(PSA\) Grower Training](#) is coming up. It is a mix of virtual and in-person sessions designed to minimize your time off-farm and maximize the awesome of attention span. The schedule is *March 25 from 9:00-noon virtual, March 26 from 8:00-3:30 in-person, and March 28 from 9:00-10:30 virtual* (food safety plans). Contact kiera.ebeling@vermont.gov or 802-461-6152 with questions.

Looking for something to listen to while you work? Andy's been busy mic'ing up growers and walking and talking to produce audio farm visits for [The Farmer's Share podcast](#). Recent episodes include [Pooh Sprague from Edgewater Farm](#) and [Geo Honigford \(formerly\) from Hurricane Flats Farm](#).

POLLINATOR SUPPORT REPORT

Laura Johnson, UVM Extension Pollinator Support Specialist

If you are using commercial bumble bees for crop pollination this year, consider requesting queen excluders with your order. Review this new [guide](#) for more details, *Protecting Wild Bee Crop Pollination Services: Commercial Bumble bee Best Management Practices*.

Depending on the weather this month, you may start to see certain native bumble bee species starting to emerge from their overwintering sites looking for flowers to eat from and a new nest site to grow their summer colony. Remember as spring cleanup approaches to "leave the leaves" until we have steady nighttime temperatures in the 50s, as many wild pollinators are still in their nests found under leaves and in plant stems.

HEALTH SAVINGS ACCOUNTS

A farmer suggested we let others know about HSAs. These allow you to pay for unreimbursed medical expenses such as deductibles, co-payments, and services not covered by insurance—if you have a high-deductible health plan. This [fact sheet from Rutgers University](#) notes that the tax advantages are typically that contributions are deductible, withdrawals are not taxed if used for medical expenses, earnings on the savings account are tax-exempt, and unspent balances may accumulate without a maximum limit.

ARUGULA DISEASE RESEARCH TEAM

March 13 from 3:00-4:30pm. Join the Northeast Arugula Team Grower Network Webinar, which aims to serve arugula and Brassica leafy green vegetable producers and agricultural professionals in the Northeast US. The webinar will share information about bacterial diseases of arugula and other crucifers, NEAT's research goals, followed by Q&A [Register here](#).

VT PESTICIDE APPLICATOR MEETINGS

March 19 from 9am-1:30pm via Zoom. [Register here](#). The fee is \$30. This meeting will cover Regulatory Updates, Rodenticide Use Standards, Vermont Pollinator Rule FAQs and Best Practices, Avoiding Herbicide Resistance in Weed Management, Worker Protection Standards Review, Respirator Safety and Fit Testing. Vermont and New York recertification credits are available if you log in individually and answer poll questions during the meeting.

April 9, from 9 am-4 pm. Initial Pesticide Certification Meeting. In-person at interactive sites in Rutland, Brattleboro, St. Johnsbury, and Burlington. [Register here](#). The fee is \$40; or \$60 after April 1. This is a review of the Northeast CORE Manual and inserts followed by the Vermont Pesticide Applicator CORE Exam for new applicators. This review is for anyone in Vermont who uses, supervises, recommends, or sells pesticides and/or trains Worker Protection Standard pesticide handlers/agricultural workers. This program does not provide recertification credits. CORE manuals and required inserts (pdf downloads) must be obtained in advance at [this site](#).

[See this site](#) for more information about these programs, or contact Sarah Kingsley-Richards at (802) 656-0475 sarah.kingsley@uvm.edu

VVBGA / UVM EXTENSION WINTER GROWER WEBINARS

Wednesdays, noon-1:00 on Zoom. Free to all. The complete list including recording and slide from past webinars is [posted here](#). You must [register](#) to get the zoom link to access the webinars.

March 6. A tour of the Pollinator Support Plan tool on the VVBGA web site.

March 13. Winter projects and business shifts will be game changers this year

March 20. High tunnel cucumbers.

March 27. Cultivation equipment and strategies—what's new and what's still working.

April 3. Gearing up for a season of disease and insect pest management on your farm.

April 10. Tour of the new VVBGA Pick-Your-Own marketing platform.

FARM LABOR DASHBOARD PROJECT

The [Farm Labor Dashboard](#) project helps farm owners, managers and crew leaders build knowledge and skills they need to successfully recruit and manage the right employees for their operations. March sessions (via Zoom) include:

[The Art of Negotiation](#) *March 5 and March 7, noon-1:15.* We will explore what negotiation is (and is not) and learn how to prepare for and execute a successful negotiation.

[Grow Your Farm Through Cultivating Great Staff](#) peer learning. These women-centered learning circles will focus on communication and expectations; training and delegation; and productive conflict. Two multi-session series are offered in March.

GREENHOUSE AND LIGHTING SYSTEMS ENGINEERING (GLASE)

Virtual short course, *Thursdays April 4 to May 9 from 2:00- 3:30 pm.*

The course features experts from academia and industry sharing how to select and operate greenhouse coverings, climate screens, and supplemental horticultural lighting. The [2024 GLASE Short Course](#) will explore three major systems maintaining greenhouse environments and their interactive effects: commercially available coverings, curtains, and lighting systems, showing how these systems work together to support plant growth and development. They will share real-world case studies.

NEW FACT SHEETS AND REPORTS by yours truly

[Census of Agriculture captures changes in Vermont agriculture](#)
[Impact and response to flooding of Vermont farms in 2023](#)
[Information and resources for highbush blueberry growers in Vermont](#)