

Vermont Vegetable and Berry News – May 21, 2008

Compiled by Vern Grubinger, University of Vermont Extension
(802) 257-7967 ext.13, vernon.grubinger@uvm.edu

www.uvm.edu/vtvegandberry

REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

(as of May 19)

(S. Royalton) Onions are transplanted in, have plenty of sun and water but are struggling for some unknown reason. I gave them a shot of fish to get them going. I took advantage of that first warm period and planted sweet corn by seed on April 18th. Not the greatest looking stand but it's up and moving, made it through two 20 degree nights under cover.

(Woodbury) It was great to have the nicer weather to get some field work done, but now we need some rain. Our soils dry out pretty quickly, and a persistent breeze has taken out a lot of moisture. I am hoping that this impending change in the weather really brings some water my way. It seems unnatural to be irrigating when the blackflies are biting. Plant sales at market have been strong even early in the season. We are getting on schedule after the usual start up issues and are excited about all that is to come, although I have some concerns about how much will be left at the end of the week to go to farmers market.

(Westminster) Early sweet corn! We ate our first ear of sweet corn on May 15th – really! I did a germination test in February and decided to pot up some of the sprouted seeds. We hid them behind the furnace on the sunny side of the greenhouse. They tasseled out in early April and produced nice size, yummy ears in mid-May. Anyone ever beat that? No, I wouldn't plant an entire house to corn by the way. Other than that, all grows well here, chilly nights but sales are very good.

(Durham, CT) The big thing this year is to get enough planted on time. We have more business than product right now. Despite all the economic indicators, demand is still strong for salad greens and arugula. We're trying hard to make this a no-till year. Last year's raised beds have been touched up, dressed with compost, alfalfa meal, and a small amount of organic fertilizer and then planted. After a few cuttings, everything is mowed down, torched, lightly saddle-hoed, covered with black plastic for ten days and then replanted. Weed control is really good this way. We are going to trial the 'tilther' from Johnny's and see if that can replace the covering with black plastic step as well as the saddle hoe. Meanwhile, tomatoes are happy in the greenhouse, some grafted, and small green fruit waiting to get red on several of the plants.

(Plainfield) We have our onions, leeks, kale, chard and lettuce out. Peas, beets and carrots have germinated OK. Cherry tomatoes move into the ground in an unheated greenhouse this week. I wish it would rain before I lay plastic, but there is not serious rain in the forecast. It's time to irrigate. Greenhouse plant sales are strong, prices up. Still picking greenhouse spinach and salad mix.

(Salisbury NH) Things are in high gear already. I almost am ready to pick lettuce, radishes and spinach. Now it's so dry we really need rain. What happened to all that snow moisture? Did a little trial to see if lettuce and spinach might come back if I covered it with a row cover. Not sure if that's what helped it come back or if it was all the snow cover but they did survive. Now the test will be how it actually tastes. Hoop house still in garage because we're too busy to set it up. There's always fall. Haven't hung our 'open' sign but should for last weekend of May. Can't wait to read everyone else's field notes, if anyone has time to write them.

(Killington) The growing season is off to a great start. Garlic is 12 inches high. Mixed greens will be ready for Memorial Day weekend with some help from our watering system. Sugar snap transplants are doing great, heading the right direction, up the fence. I took a different approach to the tomatoes this year: keeping them at 70 degrees and allowing them to flower out before planting them in the hoop house. Today they're loaded with green tomatoes. We should be picking them by June 25th. The "Buy Local" program is helping sales grow with meat, eggs and vegetables. We started using our own products in our restaurant and customers really enjoy that. I answer a lot of questions about Vermont agriculture which I enjoy.

(Shaftsbury) A couple observations: hairy vetch did not have a great survival rate this winter, perhaps due to warmth in October? In two pea plantings this spring, the variety with Johnny's organic "Natural II" treatment came up perfectly, and the untreated seed had a 25% germ rate in one planting and a 10% rate in another. Plant sales are good, and the field crops are starting to grow.

(Plainfield NH) 'Parched' and 'dusters' are two words that conjure up an image of what the soil moisture conditions are like in our neck of the valley. There's nothing more unproductive than laying down irrigation pipe to lay down water so you can lay down plastic. We're watering strawberries with a vengeance as we approach 20% bloom. No pests yet, weather has been a bit on the cool side as well, so what is transplanted seems to be sitting there. Physical injuries to the crew have us a bit behind in our chores but crew will get beefed up this week with the return of college kids and H2A guys. Greenhouse sales as good as last year, so far, and that is good news. Really trying to make thoughtful decisions about which tractors and how best to use them to reduce fuel consumption. Ditto fertilizer. The rising cost of these inputs will make us really rethink how we will grow vegetables in the future.

(W. Rutland) The woodchucks are pretty much cleaned out for the time being; hooved rats seem to know there are safer areas to graze. The garlic looks tremendous, plant sales are good and the first corn is up.

(Argyle, NY) We just got some much needed rain, but we will keep irrigating all the transplants going out as there wasn't nearly enough rain. The demand for good, local produce at the farmers' markets was strong all winter, and is higher every year. High tunnel production of spinach, lettuce, Swiss chard and greens have been tremendous, but the transition to outside will not be as smooth.

The January seeded Swiss chard which was planted in a tunnel in March has produced well for the past 2 weeks. The cooling system in our large root cellar has paid for itself by keeping all the root crops in near perfect condition, and we'll continue to have them for markets until the new crops of potatoes and carrots come in. The strawberries are flowering and forming fruit nicely, and the winter rye will be in pollen this week. The orchard is at petal fall, so the kaolin clay is being applied now in layers. Our November installed 10kW solar system has been spinning for months due to all the great sunshine and our electric bills have been down by about 85 percent!

(Wolcott, VT) The fields are in great shape, but we could use some more rain. We've transplanted the brassicas and long-season specialty pumpkins, and this week we'll transplant the corn; next week melons. This month is a lot of laying plastic and harrowing the areas that will get cover crop this year. And re-arranging the maps as things get planted differently than the map dictated.

(Grand Isle) We have been pleased to have more moderate spring temperatures than a year ago this time. It has meant more early plantings and some savings on greenhouse fuel consumption. We are spending much of our time with asparagus harvesting. Our first two weeks of farmers markets have been well attended by eager shoppers. It has been educational to learn more about our farm by participating as a host farm in some of the current university field research studies; namely with nematodes and pest issues and beneficial biological controls. We have a fine group of returning high school and college age employees. For the record: today's young people **are** able to get up early and work hard and have a sense of humor; they are a delight to have helping us for another season.

(Brandon) Relatively cool and dry soils have been slowing the breakdown of tilled cover crops, making early cultivations a little difficult on smaller direct-seeded crops. Amazing how the wind starts gusting 25 mph the day after tiny, slow-germinating seeds come up, making you stand there and hold your flame weeder in place and create new words of expression. Early transplanted sweet corn under row cover is looking excellent. Easy to cultivate and growing strong under .7 oz/yd row cover. We had been using a heavier row cover in years past for the temperature, but we like the lighter weight for the increased light levels. Double edges help prevent ripping while handling the wider 50 foot covers. Surprised by stronger than usual bedding plant sales this early, which has kept us from keeping up with field crop tasks. So as the bill pile goes down, the weeds grow taller. Greenhouse crops staying nice with drier air, though this week will be more about watching for wilt before any unnecessary watering.

(Little Compton, RI) South coastal New England has had very even moisture for the last few weeks. The payoff has been very high winds that usher in the rains arrival and departure! We are talking about sustained 40 Mph winds with 50Mph gusts for days at a time. We have lost many large sheets of row cover like never before. When we are under the gun like this it is a confirmation of just how problematic greenhouses like the Haygrove system would be for us. Very few articles discussing the advantages of the Haygrove greenhouse system acknowledge just how much of a problem strong sustained winds pose.

The Haygrove solution to strong winds is to open up the houses completely! It seems counter intuitive but is logically seeing just how under constructed the individual members are. A few years ago a few of us New England farmer made a trip to the Salinas area to checkout vegetable growing on a slightly larger scale.... One of my memories was seeing a Haygrove type greenhouse in ruins and hearing about another that had gone down another township away. Before making an investment of this type, do a wind assessment to be sure you are up to the challenge!

VERMONT GROWERS WELCOME DR. YOLANDA CHEN

Yolanda Chen joined the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences at the University of Vermont in the beginning of April. Her research background is in insect ecology and population genetics. She did her Ph.D. and Postdoctoral work at the University of California at Berkeley. From there, she moved overseas to the Philippines where she worked at the International Rice Research Institute as an entomologist for the last four years. Her research interests involve contrasting agricultural systems with natural systems to determine how agricultural practices have affected natural biological control. The overall goal of her research program is to determine how ecological and evolutionary information can be used to improve sustainable pest management. She is very interested in working with Vermont vegetable and berry growers to understand how the landscape can influence pest suppression, and how on-farm cropping diversity can be used to enhance conservation biological control. Her email address is Yolanda.Chen@uvm.edu.