

Vermont Vegetable and Berry News – August 11, 2009

Compiled by Vern Grubinger, University of Vermont Extension

(802) 257-7967 ext.13, vernon.grubinger@uvm.edu

<http://www.uvm.edu/vtvegandberry>

Calls and e-mails about late blight are pouring in. The disease is all over the state, yet some lucky farms have been spared. Control efforts are variable, which may have to do with the local level of disease pressure and what is being applied for protection. For background info and fungicide options see: www.uvm.edu/vtvegandberry/factsheets/LateBlight2009.pdf

UPDATE ON HARVESTING POTATOES FROM FIELDS WITH LATE BLIGHT

The last newsletter gave advice on how to save your tubers even if the foliage is infected. An update to that is: after mowing, and then waiting 2 weeks till harvest to let tubers cure underground for 2 weeks while tops completely die off, it's a good idea to allow 3 to 4 days of additional curing of the tubers in a dark barn prior to placing in cold storage. That will help heal up the wounds created during harvest. If there is a lot of infection in the foliage at mowing it may also make sense to spray it with a fungicide once or twice prior to harvest, to kill off as many spores as possible.

REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

(Starksboro) Bear in the corn. Blight in the potatoes. Very wet all over. The tomatoes don't have late blight.... yet. I'm keeping them mercilessly covered with copper. Forces of nature at work. Boy, were we spoiled by the great year in 2007. Somehow I am managing to stay optimistic. If it dries up now we may yet live to tell the tale.

(Royalton) Mom always said that if I didn't have anything good to say not to say anything at all... our tomatoes with late blight are all burned and buried. Potatoes mowed and vegetation drying to try and salvage tubers. Still only half the hay we need in the barn. A skunk is killing the meatbirds. But the beans are the best ever; the summer squash is brilliant. The garlic is in and half of it cured and beautiful. The corn is finally beginning to ripen, and we're a week away from the first watermelon. The celery and celeriac are gorgeous. The beets, carrots, basil and dill are wonderful. The cukes are amazing. The sheep are so fat because the grass won't stop growing. We canned 32 quarts of salsa verde with green tomatoes. The artichokes think we're in Italy. Waiting for the Army Worms to show up...

(Hinesburg) Late blight has hit us. We tore out our tomatoes and are going to try to save the potatoes. Generally a wet year; I am sure it is dry everywhere else...must just be the spot we are in. Recent sun has been nice. Melons just starting to ripen; some corn is coming in but spotty pollination and small ears. Doing our best to have a good fall. Brassicas look great.

(Moretown) Summer squash got a disease that wiped out all but 3 of the 200 plants in the ground, and rather fast: within 2 weeks! Tilled them under. Tomatoes and spuds are coming on strong, finally, with the last few weeks of actual summer weather. Fingers crossed to keep the fast-spreading late blight away. With 310 lbs of seed potato in the ground and 600 tomatoes, I am just wishing for a big bubble over the farm to keep the spores away. Deer have been having a buffet of the field cukes.

(W. Rutland) Garlic is harvested and looks good. For the first time ever, I had meadow voles digging up corn seed. Trouble is, one must use smaller restraining devices than I prefer to capture them. Add another critter to the trophy room (actually over 50 of them). Everything has been slow this year except the cabbage and broccoli.

(Westmoreland NH) We have the late blight on our tomatoes as of last week and have pulled some plants and are using Serenade to prevent spread. Also, using Calcium 25 and epsom salts in soil in the 3 hoophouse tomato areas to increase their vigor, hoping they won't be affected. They look beautiful and we have been harvesting from them for over a month. We know of other farms in the county who have it as well as some of our neighbor's gardens. Harvested a lot of early season potatoes prior to this and they are the most bountiful ever, perhaps due to so much rain. The leaves were not affected and we are getting some mid and late season out this week to be sure they are not affected. Onions looking like they have botrytis and we gave them some Serenade too. We have had a good year overall and most other crops have done well so far and are looking good.

(Burlington) How nice it is to see the sun. Melons, eggplant, and sweet corn have finally kicked in, so it finally feels like summer at the CSA pickup. It's been all weeds and disease this summer, but when the clouds lifted, at least temporarily, I drew a hopeful conclusion: copper works! Though we have a few late blight lesions and plants affected in isolated spots, our 2 acres of potatoes and field tomatoes look pretty solid and appear to be holding on better than others in the neighborhood. We've been spraying Champ WG every 5 days since July 1, so I'm really sick of my Tyvek coveralls and safety goggles, but at least it appears to have some success. First harvests of potatoes have been beautiful; the trick will be figuring out whether we'll have disease-free spuds to store for our winter CSA share.

We've had less success vs. the onion disease complex of purple blotch, downy mildew, and botrytis which has afflicted our onions for the past 3 years running. Five-day spray intervals of Serenade bacteria may have prolonged our tops this year, but cultivar selection seems to be more important, with 'Olympic' (early yellow bulb), and 'Mustang' (storage bulb) the best of the lot vs. the diseases.

(Enfield NH) Beets are doing great, tops are hold well, and roots are sizing up. Broccoli crowns have been large and side shoots are doing very well, some as large as crowns in other years, all the brassicas other than cauliflower doing well. Carrots just starting to come in, several weeks late, but plants are very healthy. Eggplant just started this week, 2 to 3 weeks behind last year. Peppers plants are very healthy, but there are almost no fruit, one variety (one row) has good fruit, but most have very little so far, still lots of blossoms. Cukes, summer squash and zucchini are doing reasonably well. Melons looking good, were under row cover until almost mid July. Onions looking great, as do the leeks and shallots. Garlic is good and drying well. Lettuce is very good this year, generally larger than normal, some huge, though Romaine ribs are browning currently, and some bottom rot particularly in the Boston. Field tomatoes starting to produce well, but some signs of possible late blight, we are taking out any plant that looks like it may have late blight as a preventative. High tunnel tomatoes doing well, though they started late. Just getting into full production with the grapes.

(S. Royalton) An unexpected bright spot on this horrible season is cantaloupe. Good fruit set, good taste, plants look pretty good, though a week behind. My first seeded corn is waist tall and about 25% of them have made an acceptable ear about six inches off the ground, which means the perfect setting for crows. They move down the rows and eat it before it fully matures. Had late blight on tomatoes, which I caught early, caused me to go on an Oxidate spraying rampage to see if a daily spray would check it (it doesn't). The icing on the cake is market sales are down about 20 to 25%. At this point we have to just put down our heads and work toward next season.

(Cambridge) Most of the blueberry bushes are thriving and covered in berries but some have died of a as-yet undiagnosed reason. The UVM Plant Diagnostic Clinic can find no disease but the root system is non-existent. Could be that even in our sandy spot, they drowned in the wettest summer ever. Has anyone else had similar symptoms in their blueberries? Unfortunately the blue jays discovered them as well so we had to cover them in netting which always causes havoc taking nets off to pick or mow. Raspberries are looking pretty good though. In a year like this, I am grateful for any good news.

(Westminster West) Greenhouse raspberries are starting to come in, a bit later than last year, however the yield looks like it will be much larger than last year's. There is also much less bug pressure this year but I really don't know why, perhaps the beneficial bug population is up. The winter squash and pumpkins are looking great with pumpkins coloring up already and some squash almost ready. Awaiting delivery of a new wash and grading line to handle the expected crop. Garlic crop is all in and dried, selling well. Much larger bulbs than last year and raising prices hasn't hurt sales. Our onion crop is huge and the Walla Wallas are averaging well over one pound each with many over 1.5 even 2lb each. The later varieties are looking equally vigorous and large. Greenhouse tomatoes seem fine with no sign of blight yet. Many customers report that their garden tomatoes and potatoes are infected, but so far we seem fine. Melons are almost ready but seem smaller due to the wet and cold. Just planted our fall spinach crop. Lastly, our fall mum and aster crop are showing color much earlier than usual due to the wet, cold summer.

(Plainfield NH) The discovery of late blight in our tomato houses and in our potatoes on the 16 of July was a pretty discouraging blow to us in an extremely mediocre year at best. At this point I'm hesitant to tell you we have it under control and but it actually appears as though we have almost stopped it and will be harvesting a good crop of both tomatoes and potatoes. We achieved what control we got in the potatoes by rotating between materials and chemical families and now we are about to burndown the potatoes to prevent them from bulking up too much (except for the fingerlings and russets). I am concerned about storage as I've found 2 potatoes that appear to be infected. I'm even more concerned about volunteer potatoes in the fields next year, as we have some still coming up in fields that were in potatoes 2 years ago due to the fact the ground hasn't had a hard winter freeze. Now that the disease is here we'll need a hard freeze more than ever. In greenhouse tomatoes, pruning for air circulation followed by an application of dithane and curzate seems to have the disease in check. We did rogue out 175 out of 3100 plants, mostly heirlooms and determinate paste varieties. The rest suffered some degree of over-pruning. But we'll still harvest a high percentage of the tomato crop and prices remain strong as a result of home garden losses to the disease. In all, a much better situation than I anticipated a month ago. Otherwise, a meager set on melons, a light crop of blues, sweet corn harvest started 10 days later than usual and slow development of peppers. Corn earworm in the heliothis traps already, and alternaria is making a mess of the tops of purple carrots. Still, 5 clear days in a row have rejuvenated our spirits.

(Newbury) We started seeing blight on our field tomatoes around July 25, and kept pulling up plants as they got infected. They all had it by Aug. 1st and 75% of our potatoes have it now.

(Wolcott) Cucurbit, tomato, and corn seed crops are all looking really good, but we're starting to lose some of our brassica seed crops to Sclerotinia. We've been spraying sulfur weekly – considering all the rain we've had – but the crops that form the most dense canopies over the soil are impossible to cover completely, so the fungus comes up from the soil below. So far the bear hasn't yet broken into the bee cages. Experimented with using flies as pollinators in addition to bees this year. Worked just sort of OK – we have a lot more to work out in terms of timing. Breeding plot looks fabulous this year. Making many crosses between inbred sweet corn lines. Squash pollinations wrapped up. Got a good fruit set on almost every line.

(Little Compton RI) A lot of people are struggling with organic solutions to late blight and many other diseases this year. In desperation some are mixing various organic chemicals without much information from manufacturers. I hope at this winter's New England Vegetable and Fruit Conference there will be discussion among organic growers about the use (or dependence) on copper hydroxide as our only good disease defense. It is not working at many levels. First, people are ignoring the maximum pounds per acre-per year and going way over in desperation to crops alive. And what about the environment? Copper hydroxide has "Danger" on the label. It is highly toxic to fish, mammals, frogs. With all the water we are getting, is copper washing into streams and creeks, damaging delicate biological systems? We need to discuss what makes more biological sense: to stick to certain rules of the past or have an open mind about what will work and possibly start adjusting our regulations to not only save our crops but to take a look at the big picture. Maybe we need to explore a "bio-rational" approach to farming that takes the best of organic methods and blends them with alternatives that work.

(Montpelier) This continues to be a very challenging season. I lost my nerve and topped all my potatoes last week. Just could not stand gambling with the crop anymore. Greenhouse tomatoes continue to do fine with some disease in there but no late blight yet. Field tomatoes are a different story. Pole beans look very good, late corn will be in soon also. Greenhouse cukes are doing very well. Fall planting of Brassicas is in. An earlier planting is just sitting there and not forming any heads. The lack of outdoor heat is a big challenge to many crops. Garlic is hanging and curing. Winter squash is trying to set fruit but one field continues to be very wet and the lack of heat is keeping the plants small. Squash bug nymphs have arrived. Good luck to everyone with the rest of this season.

(Salisbury NH) Things are finally growing a little better without the deluge. However, we haven't had much warm weather so peppers and eggplants have been struggling. Finally have picked a few ripe tomatoes. Haven't had attack of dreaded Late Blight but it's all around us. We've already harvested and sold most of our red potatoes. We've cut the foliage on the Kennebecs and will harvest shortly. Pests haven't been bad.

Hoping the late July plantings of spinach, lettuce, broccoli, etc. will make it before we have a frost; Sept. 4th is a full moon and we hope to make it beyond that with luck. Seems like we're already having fall weather with nights in the low 50's. People are starting to come out in droves. They're all talking about the small corn ears this year. So many customers don't seem to understand the weather connection.