

Vermont Vegetable and Berry News – Sept. 7, 2009

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REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

(Cambridge) We finally got late blight this past week. It came in on a huge windstorm and has obliterated all of the tomatoes. Wow, it works fast. At least we now know what it looks like. We were unclear if the potatoes had it, but had mowed them down as a precaution mid-August. Now that I have seen it, I am confident the potatoes didn't have it but we did the right thing nonetheless. The Brussels sprouts, leeks and edamame look really good. That is the best thing I can say about the season.

(Royalton) The cherry tomatoes in the hoophouse have actually begun a slow recovery from the blight. All but the hybrid yellow pears are still setting fruit and producing. There are no new lesions on the plants. The hornworms are horrendous, even denuding the hot peppers. Watermelon and muskmelons are amazing. Sweet corn is being stormed by skunks. Zukes, cukes and yellow squash are pretty much shut down due to cold nights. Cubanelle peppers are fabulous. Fall crops are doing well in hoophouse: Chinese cabbage, carrots, beets, turnips, kale, arugula, spinach. Still short on hay, because our fields are still wet.

(Bradford) Instead of my usual honey bees and bumble bees taking care of cross pollinating, bare faced hornets have moved in. I have done research to find they are not true hornets, but an enlarged member of the yellow jacket family; they pack a punch when they sting you. Hopefully they will leave before my Heritage crop is ready to pick but I am not sure if the flowering will be completed before my berries are ripe. It looks like I am a couple of weeks before picking time. (Editor's note: try yellow jacket traps like those at <http://www.fatal-funnel.com>. They have doors that allow the yellow jackets to get in but not out, and they drown in the sugar water.)

(Starksboro) We've been processing chickens using the state run mobile processing unit. Being the first has been a little challenging but overall it's been a very positive experience. We were able to run 600 birds on a prime piece of growing ground, next year we hope to do more. We are trying to develop a system that will utilize birds to add fertility and pigs to reclaim overgrown pasture. Our insurance company refused to insure "un-inspected birds" so we are very grateful to the state for providing us with an affordable alternative. The winter squash crop has been better than expected. Weed control was virtually impossible; without black plastic and raised beds we'd be sunk (literally).

(Plainfield NH) The change in weather has helped everyone's disposition, but the damage done by the summer's disease pressure and the outcome is irreversible at this point. Packing out potatoes, onions, corn, peppers and tomatoes for wholesale takes up the better part of the day. Trying to wedge in strawberry plug planting, but can't devote time to get it done, and as the plants arrived later than hoped; we feel a little up against it at this point. Have been seeding fall cover crops in a timely fashion. Had some old red clover seed left over and took a gamble in the dampness of mid-July to put it in and it all came up in 4 days! Now have a handsome stand of red clover 6 inches tall where the 3 acre strawberry bed was. Moisture levels have been good for getting a good stand established of peas/triticale, rye/vetch, and caliente mustard.

Corn earworm trap counts are high in the "hail Mary" corn, powdery mildew is rampant in fall vines. Lateblight in the tomato greenhouses is asserting itself once again but we're pretty much picking out in the field, and have kept those well covered up; there is definitely some difference in varietal resistance. It will be interesting to see if breeders capitalize on this if this late blight becomes an annual problem in our new era of climate change.

(Durham CT) For a while it looked like we were going to escape the blight. All our tomatoes are under plastic, which affords some protection but it seems that nothing could withstand the amount of contagion that existed in our area. We have around 1500 plants in five different houses. When we saw it in the first house, we tried pulling out the contaminated plants. After a few days of that, I decided the only thing to do was to take the whole house down. We disposed of the plants and kept the green tomatoes in boxes. In the next few weeks, they either ripened nicely or turned to mush. Constant culling was necessary. Copper seemed to help keep things at bay for a while in the rest of the houses, but eventually the blight spread everywhere. Interesting that some varieties seem more resistant to late blight; including Juliet, Sungold, Black Cherry and Striped German. It would be helpful if someone could collect all of our miserable experiences so that if the next time happens, we can be better prepared. In the meantime, fall greens and spinach planting is underway. The greens all seem to take on a vibrant color and texture with the cooler weather. I am now getting used to not having to worry about flea beetles, and the hassle of using row covers. That point almost coincides with the need to get the heavier row cover out to keep them warmer at night. Soon, we will take the tomato houses totally down and get our winter stockpile of kale, spinach and claytonia going.

(Little Compton RI) We lost a ton of garlic to Sclerotinia (the species that just attacks Alliums). It is a white mold that didn't show up until about a month after the garlic was cured. We have decided that we need a cool dry air conditioned room to keep this type of product safe. This is the third time this has happened. The third planting of field tomatoes looks great; just hope we have enough sun and heat to bring them in. We plan on topping them off next week to force fruit maturity. Fall broccoli and cauliflower starts this week. Amen. For any beekeepers out there, be sure to feed pollen this fall to your bees. All this terrible weather is making their stores come up way short. On top of feeding sugar syrup be sure to order some pollen substitute and feed it as long as they will take it.

(Cabot) September 5th we had a very light frost in the cold pockets. I guess that qualifies us as a "cold mountain hollow".

(Enfield NH) Onion still growing, though some tops have fallen over. Melons coming in and looking really good, both cantaloupe and watermelons. Cukes slowing down a lot, summer squash and zucchini pretty much done. Some powdery mildew showing up in the winter squash. Field tomatoes still producing well, though slowly losing the fight to late blight. Still pruning the blight off and tilling the residue under and pulling some plants. Tilled under the third planting of plum tomatoes, they were done. Greenhouse tomatoes still good. Still spraying everything about once a week. Brassicas, beets, and lettuce doing well. Eggplant doing very well but peppers still struggling; have good peppers, but only 10 to 20 percent of what I should have.

PUMPKIN HARVEST TIPS

(exerpted from UMass vegetable notes)

Ideally, pumpkins should be harvested when fully mature, with a deep orange color and hardened rind. But if they've started to turn color, they'll ripen off the vine under the right conditions. While not ideal, this is preferable to leaving them in the field if conditions are not favorable (like night temps below 50F, which can cause chilling injury). Pumpkins can be ripened in a warm well-ventilated barn or greenhouse. The best temperatures for ripening are 80 to 85 F with a relative humidity of 80-85%. Night temperatures should not drop below the sixties. Even if pumpkins are ripe, a period of warm curing can improve storage life. The curing period should be about 10 days. During this process, the fruit skin hardens, wounds heal and immature fruit ripens – all of which prolongs the storage life. After curing, pumpkins should be stored in a cool, dry place. Ideal temperatures are 50 to 60 F and relative humidity of 50 to 70%. Higher humidity allows condensation on the fruit with risk of disease, and lower humidity can cause dehydration. Higher temperatures increase respiration and can cause weight loss. Again, temperatures below 50 F cause chilling injury. In a greenhouse, temperature can be managed with ventilation on sunny days. Unless it is quite cool, heat is not likely to be needed if the house is closed up at night. If you do not have a structure to store the fruit in, find a shady, relatively dry location and put them under a tarp, up off the ground on pallets.

FIELD DAYS AT HIGH MOWINGS ORGANIC SEEDS, SUNDAY SEPT. 13

A celebration of local food and agriculture in the Northeast Kingdom will be hosted by High Mowing Organic Seeds, The Center for an Agricultural Economy and the New England Culinary Institute. Visit the two acre trials with over 800 vegetable, herb and flower varieties; attend workshops on seed saving and soybean growing, and enjoy locally produced food, live music, an evening bonfire and a young farmers' mixer. This is a free fun-filled event! At 11:00 am trial fields are open for self guided tours. From 11:00 to 1:00 are workshops on: Growing, cleaning and processing food grade soybeans in Vermont; Seed mill tour with Tom Stearns; Vermont Soy Company production line tour with Andrew Meyers; UVM field trial of processing soybeans with Heather Darby; Showcase Garden tour with Heather Jerrett, Paul Betz and Sara Schlosser. From 1:30 to 3:00 is a seed saving workshop with Tom Stearns. From 3:30-4:30 is another Showcase Garden Tour. At 5:00: Local Food Celebration presented by the New England Culinary Institute, live music from Mayfly. At 6:00: bonfire and young farmers' mixer overlooking the Trial Gardens. More info: <http://www.highmowingseeds.com/field-days.html>

COVER CROPS AND SOIL HEALTH WORKSHOP, MONDAY SEPT. 21

From 4-6 pm the Brattleboro UVM Extension office will host a tour of a 3/4 acre demonstration of 20 different cover crop plots, rotated with different species over the past 5 years. Come see how different clovers, vetch, sudax, millet, soybean, cowpea, and unusual cover crops, like sesbania and crotolaria, have performed on this low-fertility, weedy site. We'll also look at tools for assessing soil health: traditional soil tests, the Cornell soil health assessment with biological and physical measures, and the saturated media test for greenhouses, tunnels and potting soils. Sponsored by UVM Extension, USDA Risk Management Agency, and the VT Vegetable & Berry Growers Assn. This workshop is free and open to all. Directions: Take Exit 1 off I-91. Turn east toward Brattleboro, under the highway. At the first light turn right. Go 1/2 mile and bear right onto South Main St. The office is another 1/2 mile up on right. Take the second drive, go around the big barn, and park by the greenhouse.