

The Oak Hill Farmer

farming in balance with nature

www.oakhillfarm.net
April May 2010

The Pruning of Fruit Trees at Oak Hill Farm

by Anne Teller

Much of my understanding of the production of fruit comes from years of trial and error; but I have never lost my enthusiasm. Although most trees, other than citrus, are dormant for 3 or 4 months; the rest of the 8 months bring interesting changes to each variety. We are all aware of the beauty of a tree in bloom, almost the first yearly visual sign of life, then the production of leaves, fruit, and again the falling of leaves (in "fall"). To produce a good crop a number of tasks must be performed. Although one can prune and shape a tree at any time of year, I prefer winter pruning because it is easier to see the structure without the leaves. Summer pruning is helpful if you want to reduce size, but not encourage growth.

Late winter and early spring chores are tree shaping to further strong branches that must carry the weight of the fruit, and allow penetration of sunlight and good air circulation. It is an exciting time, for success lies in one's hands and the ability to visualize the future. Each variety, each class and each tree has already demonstrated its' own preference: to be open with many branches developing from around a short trunk, or to have a central tall trunk that carries many branches to its full height. Most growers wish to keep fruit production within range, not too high off the ground.

Proper tools would include a pole saw, an extension lopper, a hand saw, a two handled lopper and a pair of sharp clippers. After stepping back for careful scrutinizing and deciding the

needs of a particular tree, I take a sharp pole saw and remove any crossing branches. No variety of tree wants crossing branches! If the subject is a peach; one half to 2/3ds of the branches should be headed back; the fruit will develop on last year's bright red, healthy looking branches. One should take no more than 20% of wood off apples and pears. Their fruit grows on long lasting spurs that should be renewed from time to time. The plums like a modest pruning to reduce height and open the branches to sunlight. Interestingly, white figs require heavy pruning as fruit develops on this year's wood; while black figs only need a light shaping. If a tree is old, like several of our over 100 year apple trees, one should try to encourage new branches to gradually replace the old ones which no longer produce the finest apples.

Finally, I scrape the old bark with a curry comb to eliminate the hiding places for the coddling moth and other insects that might be interested in my crop. As the old crusty bark flies off, a renewed, slightly green skin emerges. The process is like a face peel, but not just cosmetic, a necessary step in the perpetuating the health of the tree.

Some of the oldest trees here are the Bartlett Pear and the Gravenstein Apple. Whoever planted them so many years ago knew good varieties for our climate. I eagerly await the first crisp Gravenstein Apple in early July and making applesauce with my daughters. The rewards of eating home grown fruit are too many to contemplate!





RED BARN OPENS! It's been a long winter, especially for those craving local produce and flowers but unable to get to the Farmers' Markets. Come shop at the Red Barn Store beginning Wednesday May 5th at 10. Gael and the crew are ready to welcome new and returning customers.

- Available in April/May**
- SALAD GREENS** Salad Mix, Arugula, Dandelion, Escarole, Radicchio, Spinach and Treviso
- HERBS** Chives, Lovage, Oregano, Rosemary, Sorrel and Thyme
- VEGETABLES** Red Beets, Broccoli de Cicco, Burdock, Red and Green Cabbage, Carrots, Collard, Green Garlic, Kale, Leeks, Onions, Parsnips, Radish, Shallots and Winter Squash
- FLOWERS** Agrostemma, Bells of Ireland, Calendula, Iris, Larkspur, Nigella, Queen Anne's Lace, Snowball Viburnum

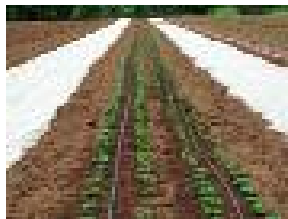
Find the Oak Hill Blog at <http://oakhillfarmer.wordpress.com>

For those of you new to the "blog" thing, it offers immediacy and an interactive element perfect for those wanting to know more about farming and food. Please subscribe, comment and learn. It's fun. Here are some recent "posts".

First Planting

February 20, 2010

It was finally dry enough to get some transplants in the ground. Well, almost. Not ideal, but it will do. Mache, radicchio, treviso, and castle franco were transplanted. Spinach, lettuce, and others were seeded. Rain was expected this afternoon, but it didn't materialize and the forecast suggested that it may not come until Sunday after-



noon. So Paul ran out late in the day, with T-tape to give the four rows of transplants a drink. He didn't want to overhead water, in case it truly dries enough to plant the rest of the field.

Some of the rows are covered to help with germination. This transplanted mache should be ready to harvest in about a month.

First Day of Spring, Saturday Planting

First Day of Spring, Saturday Planting

March 24, 2010

A portion of this field has been prepped for planting. The photo shows what the whole field looked like on Thursday. These beds are approximately 5 x 200'. Saturday morning this field was dry enough to



plant so a tractor ran through with tiller, and then a separate tool is used to "drill" organic fertilizer near the row and make small furrows to plant into. At our current size of farm we're really too small to justify a mechanical transplanter, although we're keeping our eyes out for used equipment. This planting is about 1/3 acre. The crew of 4 set roughly 5,000 plants in less than 4 hours. Thankfully this is work that is only occasional, and typically limited to half of a working day. We do a lot of transplanting in the spring in order to get produce to sell as early as possible. It also helps to give our crew much needed winter work in the shelter of the greenhouses. Plants were started in the greenhouse 1 to 3 months ago. Most of the crops here will be harvested sometime in May. Fennel will likely be early June.



Here we see the crew planting lettuce, fennel, radicchio, parsley and

Napa cabbage. Later they will be planting Kales and Rainbow Chard. In the background are crops of the same kales, collard, cabbage and broccoli running to flower from last falls' planting.

WHAT'S In Season?

by Candi Edmondson

Greens, both the colors and the produce, are everywhere at the farm this time of year, especially after so much rain. The cool, bright days seem to vibrate with life.



So many crops are running to flower, including the orchards. As vegetable crops push to flower, we cut the tender stems and buds then sell them as “raabe”. Probably the most known is broccoli raabe,

which has been selected for its small heads. But many of the other crops are delicious as well. Perfect addition to a simple stir-fry.

A rather unusual spring crop is stinging nettles. No one can forget their first encounter with these lacy lovelies. They grow in good soil, often alongside salad crops. And have many needle-like hairs that will cause quite a sting when handled. But are also quite nutritious (very high in minerals, especially iron), taste similar to spinach and shouldn't be passed up if you have them growing. Blanching will knock off the needles, allowing for easy handling. Dropping them into boiling water and simply steeping for tea is an excellent, simple, spring tonic. When the water has cooled, take out the nettles and strip the leaves off the stems. Whir the leaves in the blender and add to rice or make a nettle pesto. Deborah Madison has a recipe for Nettle Soup with onion, potato and chard in her excellent *Local Flavors* cookbook.

Does anything say spring louder than asparagus? Oak Hill planted 1/4 acre of asparagus 2 years ago. This year is the first harvest from this significant planting. It is one of a



very few perennial vegetables, some plantings still being productive for as long as 20 years, with their peak harvests occurring 10 years out. Good news for Oak Hill-Asparagus fans. It is delicious raw, lightly

steamed, or grilled. Serve it with another spring favorite, green garlic.

Green garlic is actually garlic pulled out of the ground before it heads up. Toward the end of its run, the bulbs get bigger and when cut, the individual cloves are easy to see. Use green garlic wherever you would use garlic. The beauty of garlic at this stage is that you don't have to peel cloves, just trim off the roots and chop up the whole thing to where the stalk becomes too tough. It cooks quickly, similar to a leek, and the flavor is subtle and not nearly as strong as dry garlic. What we do not sell as green garlic, will continue to mature and be pulled out of the ground in



June to be allowed to dried.

Another spring favorite has to be fava beans, or the springtime labor of love. This large meaty, emerald-green bean is used worldwide because of its double duty role on the farm. It feeds the soil, then the farmer. Commonly grown as part of a covercrop blend because of its nitrogen-fixing capacity, fava plants are also big and full of slow-to-digest carbon. The bean is similar to a lima bean, with a better texture and brighter flavor. For an exceptional treat, try making it into a humus instead of using garbanzo beans. Just invite a bunch of busy hands to help with the rather tedious shelling steps. 

Oak Hill Farm Goes to College at Sonoma State

by Jonah Raskin

I manage 30 acres of old vineyards, and very little has changed in the last 100 years," Will Bucklin - from Bucklin Winery - told the crowd at Sonoma State University. I feel like I'm a very lucky man."

It was early March, a cold rainy day and still winter. Will Bucklin - along with his mother Anne Teller and his two sister, Arden Bucklin-Sporer and Kate Bucklin - was on a panel in the library that was about "Farms, Families, Food, and the Future." Jesus Soto from Oak Hill was

there, too, as well as Andrea Krout, the North Coast Regional Program Coordinator from California Farm-Link, the organization that connects wanna-be farmers with folks who have unused land. "It's often a challenge for farms to survive from one generation to the next," Krout said. "That's why we exist." She added, "Oak Hill is a beautiful model for the rest of us to follow."

Everyone else on the panel had a direct connection to Oak Hill Farm. Jesus Soto, better known as Chuy, is perhaps the oldest living connection. He remembered Otto Teller, Oak Hill's founder who introduced him to organic farming when he first arrived in Sonoma from Mexico. "You have to love farming," Soto said. "It's something that comes from the heart." He looked out at the students in the audience and told them, "We need you kids to become farmers. Don't be afraid to get dirty. There are lots of rewards."

Anne Teller also told stories about Otto Teller: his fishing, his environmental concerns, and the influence of Robert Rodale's books on his own practice of organic farming. "We're not new to the green revolution," Anne Teller said. "Over the past 30 years the farm has taught us a

lot. Nature is what drives us. Business comes second."

Arden Bucklin-Sporer grew up in San Francisco in the 1950s and 1960s, and shared her memories of her mother. "Greenness was bred in mom," she said. "We grew up green, and it feels good to see the resurgence of green and organic and local agriculture. There's so much wild land around Oak Hill, too, with bob cats and mountain lions and so much more."

Arden's sister, Kate, explained her own affinities for Oak Hill. A research scientist who has studied fish populations in the West and who worries about their dwindling numbers, she talked about water as a basic resource and about "failing oceans" all around the world. "In order to survive we're going to have to get away from the kinds of destructive practices we've had for far too long," she said. "Oak Hill can serve as a model. It certainly grows food for a lot of people and the water is clean and clear here."

The audience - students, teachers and administrators - was clearly inspired. "What can I do to help?" a librarian asked. Andrea Krout offered practical suggestions, and someone in the audience shouted out, "Go to the Red Barn Store. They have wonderful produce." The students headed off to classes, and the Oak Hill contingent went home in the steady, much-needed rain.



These two beautiful wild cats were caught on Rodney Jackson's hidden camera in Oak Hill's woods last year.



You can find Oak Hill Farm produce on the menu at the following local restaurants: Cafe LaHaye ♦ Depot Hotel ♦ El Dorado Kitchen ♦ Epicurean Connection ♦ Estate in Sonoma ♦ fig cafe ♦ girl and the fig ♦ Grindstone Bakery ♦ Harvest Moon Cafe ♦ Kenwood Restaurant ♦ La Salette ♦ The Lodge at Sonoma ♦ Saffron ♦ Westerbeke Ranch ♦ Wild Thyme Catering

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