

# The Oak Hill Farmer

www.oakhillfarm.net

APRIL 2009



◀ Transplanting is what's happening right now. Broccoli, spring cabbages and onions, cauliflower and bok choy. If the weather cooperates and the wild turkeys don't eat them all, these crops should be ready for harvest in late May. Pictured left to right, Nick Fuchs (a high school student on special study) Miguel Barrios, David Cooper and Paul Wirtz on the tractor.

Send questions and comments about the Oak Hill Farmer or additions to the e-mailing list, to [candied@vom.com](mailto:candied@vom.com).

## What's in a Word?

*If It's the word "Sustainable", It's a Whole Way of Thinking and Being in the World*

By Jonah Raskin

The words sustainable and sustainability aren't in many dictionaries of the American language. They're not in the Webster's on my shelf, or in the American Heritage Dictionary that I use almost every day. But the words ought to be there. It seems possible to define them in meaningful ways for intelligent readers, and define them too, without making them into terms the government might use to enforce certain agricultural practices.

Sustainable, and sustainability, are what Oak Hill, and small, local farms like it all over the country are about. They're good, sturdy words that are used increasingly everyday, and they might as well be used accurately. Not to use them seems as silly as asking a farmer not to use the word "hoe," or telling a doctor not to talk to patients about health or wellness. In fact, sustainability is about the health and wellness of the earth. It's about healthy farming practices. Growing produce sustainably means preserving not polluting, renewing not destroying, putting into the soil as much as you take out of it so that it will remain

alive and vital. Sustainable farms grow vegetables and fruits that are nutritious and taste good. They also treat their workers humanely. Makes a lot of sense, doesn't it?

I first heard the words sustainable and sustainability from Paul Dolan who was the President of Fetzer Vineyards in Hopland. Dolan explained to me that sustainability had to do with "creating a healthy environment for employees at Fetzer, and a healthy community for local citizens." It also meant, he said, operating on a financially sound and a profitable basis, though not making profit the one and only part of the equation. When I met Dolan he had just come back from New York, where he had tried to persuade the CEOs of major corporations that they ought to adopt sustainable practices. "I spoke at Forbes in New York," he explained. "The idea of social responsibility in business made many of those people feel uncomfortable. They think that sustainability is a threat to profits. They have a lot to learn."

Too bad those CEOs didn't learn from Dolan back then! If they had, the U.S. economy - and our whole planet - might not be in the sorry shape it's in today. In fact, if you want to know what sustainability isn't, take a look at the present state of American financial institutions. Ignoring sustainable business practices, and ignoring the health of the environment, and the wellbeing of human beings has led irrevocably to the present global crisis in which we all find ourselves.

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## STAFF PROFILE

# Jesus "Chuy" Soto

**C**huy Soto has worked his way up. His dad, Jesus Soto, Sr., worked at Oak Hill beginning in the early 70s and Chuy arrived at the farm in 1977. He began working along with the rest of the crew but as he learned English and his language skill increased, so did his responsibility. Chuy now manages the flower operation at the farm and designs most of the wreaths in the Red Barn Store.

Oak Hill Farm offers Chuy a diverse day. From planting, to irrigating, then harvesting whatever is coming ready to pick, Chuy and his crew work long hours, packing many tasks into each day. Providing bouquets for the Red Barn Store and the Farmers' Markets is the final rewarding task in a long series of events that

needs to be done.


During the summer, Chuy can often be found working at the Tuesday evening market, wrapping his flowers for grateful customers. Talking with friends and farmers at the end of a long day provides "the social scene" which is decidedly lacking in the fields.

And his favorite vegetable? Cucumber. Favorite flower? Sunflowers. But tomatoes are the crop he eats the most. "Salsa, raw, sliced. I like them all, maybe the reds best."

Two of Chuy's three children have worked for the farm. Estefania worked in the Red Barn Store for several years, helping Gael, until she graduated from high school last year. And Benny, his oldest has been driving flowers and produce to our customers



in San Francisco for several years.

When not working, Chuy likes to write and on Sundays in the spring and summer he plays baseball --- third base. He has a great singing voice. Many of you have probably heard him sing and MC at Mexican Independence Day in Sonoma. I sometimes wonder if he learned to sing with such gusto, while working in the field. 

## FROM THE FIELDS

**T**he greenhouses are stuffed to capacity right now. We have two large houses, down at the Romberg property, 20 x 50' and 20 x 100'. We start plants in the greenhouse to protect from the cooler temperatures and rain, so we have crops just a little earlier.

Right now we have a host of alliums; several red and yellow onions, leeks and shallots. And the brassicas; broccoli, cauliflower, cabbages, bok choy and radicchio. And then there are the tomatoes, peppers and eggplants. And celery and new herbs. The place is humid and bursting with life.

The first of those crops, the brassicas and some of the onions, have gone out as you see on page one of the newsletter this month. The field was prepared by chopping in cover crop. Then the field rested, digesting the chaff and growing micro-organisms. The plants were transferred up from the greenhouse and by early after-



▲ The flowers fields are pushing.

noon the crew of 4 began planting the roughly 3,000 transplants. They work fast and the crop was getting its first drink by 5.

Some of the crops are seeded directly in the ground. In March, all the salad crops, beets, carrots, broccoli raabe, spinach, radishes, greens, peas have been planted at least once.

Weeding is a big project for both the produce and flower crew right now. With the warmer weather, everything wants to grow. Weeding and thinning are critical to good growth and efficient harvesting. It is one of the most labor intensive on-going jobs on an organic farm.

On the flower side of the farm, most of the crops are direct seeded. This month began the usual rotation of agrostemma, asters, bells of Ireland, calliopsis, calendula, larkspur, marigolds, millet, nigella, sunflowers and zinnias. Beginning with the larkspur, most everything can and will be dried for wreaths, if it is not sold fresh.

Everyone is busy!

*You can find Oak Hill Farm produce on the menu at the following local restaurants: Cafe LaHaye ♦ Depot Hotel ♦ El Dorado Kitchen ♦ Estate in Sonoma ♦ fig cafe ♦ girl and the fig ♦ Harvest Moon Cafe ♦ Kenwood ♦ La Salette ♦ The Lodge at Sonoma ♦ Murphy's Irish Pub ♦ Saffron ♦ Westerbeke Ranch ♦ Wild Thyme Catering*

## VEGETABLE OF THE MONTH: SALAD MIX

Anyone who has given it any thought at all, won't be surprised to learn that a lot goes in to a typical bag of Oak Hill Farm salad mix. Many varieties of lettuce, Asian greens and chicories must be planted, grown, and harvested. These plants mature quickly so everything is planted on a regular basis. Each green needs from three to six weeks, depending on the weather, from planting until harvest. Missing a watering on a hot day risks losing an entire planting. Soil conditions need to be right, not too rich, with well-digested and available nutrients.

Some of the mix is covered with a light fabric "row cover" to protect it from the main pest we face in this area, the flea beetle. The beetles find the Asian greens particularly tasty.

For those of you wanting to plant your own mixture of salad ingredients, here is what we grow. But don't hold us to it. Our creative farmer likes to mix things up. Chicories: Frisse, Escarole, Radicchio, Castel Franco, Trevisio; Miscellaneous Greens: Arugula, Cress, Red Mustard, Suehlung, Komatsuna, Hong Vit, Mizuna, Tatsoi, Mache, Red Kale, Ruby Streaks, Surrey Arugula, Spinach, Salad Peas Plus about six lettuces.


This year, during the hottest summer months, we are gearing up to grow several varieties of head lettuce instead of the mix. -- ce

### NUTRITION SCIENCE CORNER by Ken Nelhoff

In the last newsletter I talked about the energy producing macronutrient, carbohydrate, found in celery root. Salad mix, like all the colorful fruits and vegetables, contain certain plant compounds called phytochemicals or phytonutrients. They fall into the category of micronutrients, like vitamins and minerals, that are needed in very small amounts to perform specific metabolic functions. There are over 25,000 phytonutrients, many of which have



▲ A lettuce field partially harvested.

yet to be identified. An interesting area of research into plant compounds concerns their antioxidant activity: the ability of a chemical to trap free radicals. The over-production of free radicals in the body is thought to contribute to aging and some diseases. All the varieties of greens and reds found in Oak Hill's salad mix at this time of year, are an excellent source of antioxidants. One study found that the free radical scavenging capacity of the polyphenol phytochemical in the red colored chicories to be exceptional in antioxidant capacity, particularly in their early stage of growth. To make a long story short, different plants produce different chemicals to protect themselves, and when you eat the plant, these amazing substances protect you. 

*Ken Niehoff is a health trainer practicing in Sonoma, CA. He combines his knowledge of strength and conditioning, rehabilitation and nutrition to guide clients in their pursuit of healthy aging and disease prevention. Ken is currently in the Masters of Human Nutrition program at The University of Bridgeport. Check out his website at [sonomahealthtraining@sbcglobal.net](mailto:sonomahealthtraining@sbcglobal.net)*

*Ken and his wife Karin are "hunter gatherers" in search of sustainable, ethical, locally grown produce, and pasture fed, free range animal products. They purchase and eat a box of Oak Hill Farm salad mix each and every week that it is available.*

## LOCAL FARMING NEWS

- Anne Teller, the owner of Oak Hill Farm was honored by the National Women's History Project on March 21st at the Wells Fargo Center in Santa Rosa. The event, titled "Women Taking the Lead to Save Our Planet" introduced seven remarkable women spearheading various environmentally-based projects around Sonoma County. Anne was chosen because of her continued stewardship of the land and her ongoing determination to promote diversified farming. Following the award ceremony, a film called *A Sense of Wonder*, had its second public screening. The film is an autobiography of Rachel Carson. Carson, of course, is the scientist who in 1962 wrote *Silent Spring*, the "classic that launched the environmental movement", exposing the devastating effects of the chemical DDT on bird populations. The film was written by and starred Kaiulani Lee, who offers a historically accurate and powerfully moving portrayal of Rachel Carson. We are surrounded with inspiring people. Sonoma County grows them.
- Speaking of inspiring people, the county lost a farming leader last month when Bob Cannard, Sr. died March 7th. Cannard will be remembered for his fierce love of sustainable living and his desire to see a chicken in every backyard. He frequented the Friday Farmers' Market, stopping to chat with almost everyone. He never failed to praise our produce and share his recipes and food lore. I will miss him, his stories and his dedication to the food movement.
- The Red Barn Store at Oak Hill Farm opens April 15. This year the store is opening at 9 am, just to see how many of you are *really* early-birds. We reserve the right to start later, if it's slow. See you there!

## AVAILABLE IN APRIL

### SALAD GREENS

Salad Mix, Arugula, Dandelion, Mache and Spinach

### HERBS

Chives, Lovage, Oregano, Rosemary, Sorrel and Thyme

### VEGETABLES

Red Beets, Burdock, Cabbage (red and green) Celery Root, Collard, Green Garlic, Kale, Leeks, Onion, Parsnips and Rutabaga

### FRUIT

Lemons and Oranges

### FLOWERS

Agrostemma, Bells of Ireland, Calendula, Nigella, Queen Anne's Lace, Snowball Viburnum

and hopefully: Larkspur and Iris



▲ This field of peaches is grown for blossoms, not peaches. (The peaches are not very good, really.)

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E. F. Schumacher, the father of a great many of the contemporary ideas about sustainability, initiated the discussion in *Small Is Beautiful*, which appeared originally in 1973, during an earlier back-to-the-land movement that advocated local, organic farming. Thirty-six years later, Schumacher's book is still an inspiration, and I recommend it.

In 2007, when I worked in the fields at Oak Hill, and visited farms across Northern California, I always asked the farmers I met what sustainability meant to them. At Laguna Farms in Sebastopol, Scott Mathiesen said that he aimed for "sustainable living" so that he ran the farm and the farm didn't run him. At Quetzal in Santa Rosa, Keith Abeles, told me that "sustainable means that you farm and farm and farm and because you grow cover crops and don't deplete the soil, the land will be as good or better a hundred years from now."

At Oak Hill, Jesus Soto, better known as "Chuy," said that while his parents and grandparents in Mexico didn't use words like organic and sustainable they farmed organically and in accord with sustainable practices. "They didn't use chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides," Jesus said. "Their horses provided all the manure they could use. They raised corn, beans and their own vegetables in a small garden. They had cows for milk and cheese, and they never pasteurized their dairy products. They had healthy diets and they got lots of exercise. Most of my ancestors lived to be ninety-five or a hundred years old, and for the most part, they led lives without the kinds of stress that people have here and that kills them."

It may not have been perfect, but that life close to the land that Soto's ancestors lived has a lot to recommend it. Clearly, none of us in Sonoma County, Mexico, the United States, or

the world can go on living and working in the same old, unsustainable ways – if we are to survive as a species. We are on the brink. We can choose to be healthy, respect the earth, honor honest work in the fields, and embrace the lives of our own communities. Or we can go on polluting, destroying, and devouring. The choices are ours to make.

Sustainability and sustainable may be new words, but they convey old ideas. There are role models, and ancestors. Long ago, John James Audubon traveled across America painting birds. Everywhere he went he saw forests cut down, buffalo slaughtered, Indians killed and his beloved birds destroyed. That way of operating would have to stop, he said, or there would be no birds, no buffalo, no Indians, and no trees in America. Perhaps we might remember his words of warning. Perhaps we might also remember his role as an early environmentalist and naturalist who loved the wild woods. We can make sustainability a reality in our own lives, day-in and day-out, whether that means recycling paper products, restoring the land in our own back yards, or shopping at farmers markets. It might also mean visiting and buying spring vegetables at Oak Hill Farm in the Red Barn, an old building that has been reinvented, and that's now a truly sustainable institution, if I do say so myself. 

*Jonah Raskin is Professor of Communication Studies at Sonoma State University. He has written four books about radicals and writers, so looking for a change, he's turned to farming. His newest book, *Field Days*, is a memoir of time spent working with the crew at Oak Hill Farm and the cast of characters in the farming community here and beyond. It's due to be published next month. A reading and book signing is scheduled at the Sonoma Community Center on May 9th at 4 pm.*